

CONFLICTING COVENANTS...

WHEN DID GOD BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

BY GREG ALBRECHT



They arrived in Jerusalem with their camel caravan after spending more than a month on the road. These wealthy and wise men called the Magi were clearly men of means—their style of travel was the first-century equivalent to a sleek, sophisticated Motorhome more

than it was an ancient VW bus. On-the-street speculation about the purpose of this visit quickly ended when these dignitaries started to inquire about a newly born king of the Jews to whom they had come to pay homage. Herod (the Great) was more than a little interested when he heard what had brought these esteemed men all the way to his kingdom.

Appointed by the Roman Senate as king of Judea, Herod was, though he was a non-practicing convert, popularly known as “King of the Jews.” As King of the Jews Herod naturally viewed any baby considered to be an heir to his throne as an eventual threat. Herod called some of the same Jewish scholars with whom the Magi consulted, and learned that the baby king had



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praved acts of bloodletting. Then, as now, benumbed citizens had become somewhat calloused to news of unspeakable acts, not just at the behest of Herod, but of kings down through time.

The Bethlehem abomination was not the first massacre of children, nor was it the last.

Diabolical and sadistic brutalities inflicted on vulnerable, helpless children by military, governmental and yes, religious leaders are outrageous—sadly, the suffering of the innocents in Bethlehem is but one of many unconscionable atrocities against children recorded in the annals of history. To this day, our modern, “civilized” world continues to witness and to some degree turn a blind eye to the sexual abuse of children.

Like many other nations, the Jews were proud they had spilled the blood of their enemies on battlefields. Not only did the Jews glory in their past military conquests, their own Bible (known as the Old Testament to Christians) insisted that some of the massacres their soldiers carried out had been commanded by YHVH (some time before the first century Jews avoided saying the name of God and substituted another Hebrew word—“Adonai”).

These apparently divinely ordered and approved blood baths on Old Testament killing fields included the wholesale slaughter of defenseless children (Deuteronomy 20:16; Joshua 6:21, 11:14-15; 1 Samuel 15:3 and Hosea 13:16, among others).

Given the accepted religious belief that past massacres the Jews had carried out were divinely approved and directed, Herod, King of the Jews, may well have attempted to justify the slaughter of

maze of plots, lies, treacheries, corruption, backroom deals, political chicanery and executions. Herod's willingness to do whatever was necessary to serve his own interests makes modern day, ruthless gangsters like the fictional Godfather seem almost charming by comparison. Herod was a first century despot every bit the equal of 21st century madmen, intent on violently obliterating any and all potential threats to their selfish desires.

Herod's attempt to save his throne from Jesus by ordering the deaths of all the boy babies in the vicinity of Bethlehem, two years old and under, was but one of many in a long chronicle of de-

been prophesied to be born in the little town of Bethlehem, a suburb of Jerusalem. Pretending that he too wanted to worship this baby in Bethlehem, Herod told the Magi to let him know when and if they found him.

We know the rest of the story, don't we? The story of Herod's absolute, iron-fisted sovereign power over Judea takes one through a



cents in Bethlehem, King Jesus insisted that little children be allowed to come to him (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus was the king who would *change everything*!

When King Jesus explained his kingdom, and when he exemplified his kingdom, it was a *completely different kind of kingdom and he was a completely different kind of king* than anyone had ever heard of or known before. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, “A king who dies on the cross must be the king of a rather strange kingdom.” The upside-down, completely unexpected irony of Jesus’ humble beginnings is only surpassed by the willing vulnerability he expressed, the very love of God, at and on his cross.

The wailing of the newborn child in the midst of the muck and mire of a barnyard in Bethlehem was a new beginning for the entire world—the love of God was being made known in the most unlikely place and circumstances. That newborn child was the good news that peace had come to replace the sword. Remember those mysterious wise men outsiders, the Magi, followers of other gods, who came to honor and worship the newborn Jesus? I like to visualize the Magi sporting bumper stickers plastered on the rear ends of their camels proclaiming to fellow travelers—*The Beginning Is Near!*

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.—2 Corinthians 3:6

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!—2 Corinthians 5:17

Jesus came to *change everything* — to make everything new. He came to clear up misperceptions and set the record straight. He came to reveal God in his ministry, his actions and his teachings. What Jesus said and did was a shocking revela-

A king like no other had been born—a king who served those who opposed him rather than brutalizing and executing them... Instead of ordering the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, King Jesus insisted that little children be allowed to come to him (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus was the king who would change everything!

the innocents at Bethlehem by saying that he was merely following the script of the “Old Testament God?”

The Baby Who Changed Everything

Before the birth of Jesus, God could only be known on the basis of the law of the old covenant (John 1:17). The birth of Jesus caused the river of time to reverse its course, as it opened the door of eternity. On this side of Jesus’ birth, history flows toward God, for all are invited to come to fully know God, as he is revealed in and through Jesus. Jesus brought a new way of knowing God—Christ followers call it the new covenant. *Jesus changed everything.*

He wasn’t born into a place where humans might expect God to be born—his birthplace was Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. He wasn’t born in a castle or a mansion. No servants were bustling around,

serving Mary and Joseph. In the person of Jesus, God came to be one of us, to serve us, rather than demanding our service (Matthew 20:28). *Jesus changed everything.*

Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was the announcement—the grand proclamation—that the hope of the ages had arrived. This was the baby who would *change everything*! Jesus was Immanuel (God with us — Matthew 1:23). Jesus was the Eternal Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Babies are born every day, and people die every day, but the birth and death of Jesus was once for all (Hebrews 9:26). *Jesus changed everything.*

A king like no other had been born—a king who served those who opposed him rather than brutalizing and executing them. This king would triumph by being executed rather than executing those who opposed him. Instead of ordering the slaughter of the inno-

tion—Jesus turned religion upside-down and inside-out. Jesus was (and is) an entirely different King and a completely different God than the world of religion had known and taught.

- King Jesus was filled with love and grace. Even a casual reading of the Gospels forces us to realize that Jesus always reached out, always listened and always responded. He was not too busy, but was patient and he cared! Jesus did not threaten or cajole. Jesus was not filled with wrath, but filled with grace and mercy. Jesus never crucified anyone—but he willingly, as the greatest demonstration of love ever, accepted hatred and violence on his cross so that he might transform the kingdoms of our world into his own kingdom of peace.

- King Jesus completely identified with the lost, the aliens, the marginalized and impoverished. He himself was an outsider. Jesus valued and loved everyone on the basis of their existence rather than on the basis of their accomplishments.

- King Jesus was relational. He didn't spend his nights under 600-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets in a palace in Jerusalem while the disciples lived rough in their sleeping bags in some dusty campsite. Jesus was one of us. He was not the exception, he lived the way we all do. **He came to be one of us, so that he was not way up there, but down here, with us, in the barnyards of our lives.**

What does God becoming one of us mean for you and me? Who was this Son of God, Jesus, God in the flesh, exactly? How is he a king like no other? How and in what way does he bring peace and the favor of God? Questions like those have captivated and confounded men and women ever since his birth in Bethlehem. We can't fully grasp all that is involved in God becoming human, but we can conclude, in faith, that *Jesus changed everything*.

Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed—everything—including religion and its interpretation of God. This sad

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old world needed the good news. Everything was broken, rotting, polluted and corrupted. Jesus was good news because he came to proclaim the true nature of God the Father, and the relationship he offers to all mankind. God came to be one of us in the person of Jesus so that all mankind might be invited to come to know God as he is.

Jesus was good news because he proclaimed God's grace (John 1:17). God's grace is the best news ever—God's grace is a new and revolutionary way of knowing God. **Grace is great news because God is revealed as a God of love and mercy rather than being passionately consumed to vindicate his holiness by unleashing wrath and violence.** Before Jesus came, humans could only struggle to know God on the basis of their performance. Before Jesus, humans had little or no idea at all about the nature of God.

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Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed—everything—including religion and its interpretation of God. This sad old world needed the good news.

proclaims such a remarkably different God that many find they must think of, on the one hand, the "God of the New Testament (covenant)" and on the other the "God of the Old Testament (covenant)." It goes without saying that Jesus, the God of the New Testament (covenant), never ordered the mass killings of men, women, children and animals—*Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed.*

When God Was Born Again

William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible Series* on The Gospel of John tells about a "little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament." The little girl explained the paradox this way: "'But that happened before God became a Christian!'"

One day, as Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Samaria on his way toward Jerusalem the people of a particular Samaritan village did not welcome him.

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village (Luke 9:54-56).

Much has been made of the impulsiveness and hot tempers of James and John. But didn't James and John have good reason to assume that Jesus, the God-man,

Joshua's Victory over the Amalekites
by Nicolas Poussin c.1625–1626



The “inerrant, infallible” Bible insisted on by religious Biblicists tells us that God told Samuel... to kill every man and woman, all children and all animals of the Amalekites... There are many explanations that attempt to explain why God would have demanded such carnage—I’ve heard them, taught and preached many of them and by God’s grace I now rest in him, knowing he has forgiven me for doing so.

would react in such a way? After all, they had read and studied their Bibles (the Old Testament). James and John had read many texts that implicitly and explicitly identified God as directing atrocities. Jesus’ disciples were among the first of many who would follow them, over the many centuries, who experienced problems reconciling the “God of the Old Testament” with Jesus, the “God of the New Testament.”

Maybe James and John were hot-heads, but they also had every reason to assume that the wrath of God did not suffer fools gladly. Jesus rebuked James and John—

instead of destroying a village that refused to roll out the welcome mat Jesus just kept walking to another village. Was Jesus rebuking the common assumption about a God of wrath commonly believed to have directly ordered “ethnic cleansing”? The Old Testament presents God unleashing mass destruction, yet Jesus insisted on turning the other cheek.

Jesus said that we should not only love those who love us, but we should pray for our enemies. *Jesus proclaimed an upside-down kingdom, wherein people do not get what they deserve, but rather are*

given, by God’s grace, what they can never earn. And perhaps most puzzling of all, Jesus died on the cross, out of his love. Truly no man had ever been like him before—*Jesus changed everything.*

And make no mistake—the birth, the cross and the resurrection all worked in triune harmony to ratify and forever usher in the new covenant. But just as James and John assumed that Jesus would be perfectly happy to destroy the entire village in Samaria, so too do many within Christendom today continue to misunderstand the cross of Christ. It is not

surprising that much of Christendom today explains the cross of Christ as the Father pouring out his “wrath” on the/his Son. *Such a conclusion and interpretation is not surprising when religion feels it necessary to explain the murder of children as the infallible command of God.* After all, if God murdered anything that breathed in the Old Testament, what would stop him from demanding the torture and murder of his own Son in order that his justice could be satisfied?

This is the conclusion that Christ-less religion must support when it denies that Jesus, God in the flesh, willingly, out of an incredible act of love, accepted and absorbed the hatred and violence of humanity, with religion leading the charge.

What actually happened at the cross of Christ is normally denied, because the true motivation and explanation of the cross is a counter-intuitive, upside down head scratcher.

The message of the cross is this—Jesus, in an act of love, restored us to God by absorbing our anger and our wrath. The anger and wrath Jesus experienced on his cross was human anger and wrath—anger and wrath that Christendom at large has laid at the doorstep of the “Old Testament God.” Jesus truly *changed everything.*

No one knows the Son except the

Jesus teaches non-violence, avoiding retaliation, and loving and praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44). Why would Jesus say such a thing and insist on such a thing if he, Creator of all things, actually directed and commanded the nation of Israel to massacre men, women, children and animals?

Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.—Matthew 11:27

Because Jesus revealed God the Father, we must inevitably address apparent glaring inconsistencies



...a “little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament.” The little girl explained the paradox this way: “But that happened before God became a Christian!”

between the “Old Testament God” and the “New Testament God.” Assuming and accepting that 1) God is one, and 2) Jesus came to reveal the Father, and 3) Jesus was God in the flesh, 4) how can the “God of the Old Testament” be so radically different from Jesus, who brought us the new covenant?

God Is Violent—Stay Out of His Way!

Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.—1 Samuel 15:3

The “inerrant, infallible” Bible in-

sisted on by religious Biblicists tells us that God told Samuel, the prophet, to tell Saul, the first king of Israel, to kill every man and woman, all children and all animals of the Amalekites.

Then, when the armies of Saul actually captured Agag, the Amalekite king alive, and kept some of the cattle and sheep as plunder, God rejected him because of his rebellion (1 Samuel 15:23).

There are many explanations that attempt to explain why God would have demanded such carnage—I’ve heard them, taught and preached many of them and by God’s grace I now rest in him, knowing he has forgiven me for doing so. Perhaps the most well known and oft-used explanation that attempts to get God off the hook for such a brutal ethnic cleansing is that the Amalekites were so perverted and corrupt that nothing at all of their culture deserved to remain.

Of course it’s possible to allow yourself to be bent into a theological pretzel in an attempt to vindicate Old Testament massacres by



Of course, as a Christ-follower I must not only ask such questions of this passage, but of many others where God is depicted as demanding total annihilation (see Deuteronomy 13:15-16; 20:16-18; Joshua 6:21).

The Infallible God or an Infallible Book?

As a Christ-follower, when I read such passages, here's my dilemma and my solution, measured in steps:

1) I believe that God is one, and that he has eternally existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that Jesus, God in the flesh, is the Eternal Son of God, the

The Bible is a book that can only help me in as much as it helps me see Jesus. I interpret the significance of all biblical teaching in the light of Jesus and his teaching... I believe that all Christ-followers must read the Bible through the eyes and lens of Jesus.

saying that the "God of the Old Testament" had every right to make any demands he wanted. Well, of course God can do anything he wants, but surely we can see that assuming God orders or sanctions behavior that completely contradicts his own nature and then justifying such an assumption with a flippant "God can do anything he wants" leaves much to be desired.

Since I believe that Jesus was and is the "express image" (Hebrews 1:3 Colossians 1:15) of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) this "Old Testament God" brings me into conflict with Jesus. And when anything or anyone conflicts with Jesus, Jesus wins!

Jesus teaches non-violence, avoiding retaliation, and loving and praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44). Why would Jesus say such a thing and insist on such a thing if he, Creator of all things, actually directed and commanded the nation of Israel to massacre men, women, children and animals? After all, *if making sure people "get what's coming to*

them" was God's primary motivation, he could have brought the judgment of death on evil-doers without commanding his followers to kill those evil-doers!

I am a Christ-follower. I believe all the Bible from a **Christ-centered filter**. All history and all reality centers in and on Jesus Christ. When I try to make sense of the reality I live today, or the Bible I read today, I do so through a **Christ-centered focus**. He, after all, makes all things new and *he changed everything!*

So I must ask, about this passage in 1 Samuel:

- was Samuel accurately reporting what God told him, or
- was Samuel, motivated by good religious intentions, putting words into God's mouth because he thought that was what God ought to say, or
- did later editors/redactors put words into both Samuel's mouth as well as God's, because their religious beliefs informed them that must have been what really happened?
- is this unspeakable genocide recorded in 1 Samuel 15 a revelation about divine or human retributive "justice" and violence?

second person of the triune God, and among other things, was the creator of heaven and earth (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16 and Hebrews 1:2). Since God is one, and since Jesus is God, then he was very much "alive and well" during the time of questionable (in the light of Jesus) actions attributed to the "Old Testament God."

2) My faith, as a Christ-follower, is based on the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. My faith and practice is **Christ-centered**. Jesus is my priority. The Bible is significant and meaningful only from a **Christ-centered perspective**.

I will always choose Jesus over any version or translations of the Bible. *The Bible is a book that can only help me in as much as it helps me see Jesus.* I interpret the significance of all biblical teaching in the light of Jesus and his teaching. Jesus came to bring us a new covenant, which is new and radically different than anything before. I believe that all Christ-followers must read the Bible through the eyes and lens of Jesus.

3) Christ-less religion can bring us to a crossroads where it, and its

TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY



“There can only be One final authority for faith and practice. And mine had a beard.”—Brad Jersak

Jesus took his Scriptures very seriously. So must we! He also warned that even by diligent study and veneration of Scripture we may still fail to hear God’s word (see John 5:37-40). Today, these cautions especially apply to *Biblicism*, *Biblical literalism* and *Bibliolatry*.

Definitions:

Biblicism: an ideology that so emphasizes the *exclusive* authority and *all-sufficiency* of Scripture that it makes the Bible, rather than Christ, “the Word of God” and our “final authority for faith and practice.” Biblicism is committed to *infallibility* and *inerrancy*. That is, by supernatural guidance, biblical authors were incapable of error; every word was true.

Thus, Biblicism is prone to forcing contradictory passages to harmonize where they are not meant to. The Bible is flattened so all texts have equal authority with the words of Christ—even when the image of God they portray conflicts with the revelation of God in Christ.

Biblical literalism: a theory of interpretation that privileges by default a literal reading of any Scripture unless to do so is impossible. In practice, biblical literalism often imposes literal meanings onto the text where they were neither intended by the author, nor advisable given the genre, nor possible in light of the revelation of Christ.

Bibliolatry: a reverence for Scripture that becomes worship of the book itself—where the Bible is described in terms only attributable to God himself—and loyalty to one’s interpretation of the Bible trumps faithfulness to the Gospel.

Critiquing the 3 B’s

Claiming to defend the inspiration and authority of Scripture, Biblicism is really guilty of undermining it. Biblicists fail to take seriously the text by denying and sanitizing its

multiplicity of voices. The Bible is a lively conversation in tension and even conflict, compiled to deliver powerful overarching revelations. Biblicism fails to appreciate the beauty of the various genres and the genius of their intended more-than-literal interpretations. It fails to recognize the way Scripture testifies—and *bows*—to the living Word, Who predates, challenges and fulfills it. The Bible is a shadowy glimpse of the living Reality. To all of this, the Bible itself bears witness.

Thoughts on Key Biblicist Passages

Matthew 5:17-18: Jesus said, “I didn’t come to abolish (break) the Law, but to fulfill it, even dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s” (not literally!). In Ephesians 2:15, Paul proclaims that Christ *did* fulfill the Law, abolishing (*setting aside*) its commandments and ordinances.

John 10:35: Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken,” turning the Bible on some Biblicists who sought to trap him. He cites a Psalm and thus drives them into their own trap.

2 Timothy 3:16-17: Paul wrote that all Scripture is inspired by God [*but written by men*] and yes, profitable for instruction and correction. This includes providing *negative examples* to avoid (1 Corinthians 10:6). But Matthew 17:1-6, John 1:17-18 and Hebrews 1-2 make it clear that Christ alone is *perfect* theology, eclipsing every other claim to revelation as inferior to Jesus.

2 Peter 1:21: Peter claims the prophecies of Scripture didn’t come by human opinion, but through men carried by the Holy Spirit. He combines his personal experience with these written prophecies as witnesses in agreement to the glory of Christ alone.

All these passages affirm the importance of the Bible and God’s hand in it. But they never magnify the book to equality with Christ, nor make claims for it that it cannot bear.

Recommended reading: Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*.

interpretation of the Bible, demands as much or more allegiance to itself, its rituals, traditions, creeds and interpretations of the Bible than a Christ-follower owes solely to Jesus.

4) There are *two basic ways to understand the Bible*:

4a) it is a collection of the infallible and inerrant words of God virtually dictated to humans. The inspired, inerrant, infallible interpretation of the Bible presumes that every word of the Bible miraculously bypasses human imperfections, so that all scientific truth, historical judgments and spiritual insights are absolutely set-in-concrete infallible and inerrant words penned by human authors. This fundamentalist view insists that every word is absolutely accurate, even when judged by 21st century science and history.

But if this view is correct, why did God include human beings as a central part of the writing, editing, translating and preservation of the Bible? *If God intended the Bible to be 100% error-free, in every way, then why didn’t he write, produce, and publish it in heaven, and then parachute the perfect package to earth?*

If absolute literary perfection was intended, then why not deliver the infallible book via an-



The Children Destroyed by Bears by Gustave Doré

gels, in a similar way that storks are superstitiously presumed to deliver new babies?

Perhaps it is easier for those of us who have never been intimately touched by the teachings of Islam to consider the errors caused by fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran. Instead of allowing for the biases and prejudices of the time and without due consideration of and for human sources of its time of writing, no-nonsense, radicalized Muslims interpret the Koran as writings infallibly written in heaven before it was delivered to earth. *The intent of the Koran, deified through beliefs about its absolute inerrancy, is now believed, by funda-*

mentalist Muslims, to enshrine the will of God, in absolute detail. And how exactly is this religious mindset working out? This interpretation allows for the use of force against those who do not subscribe to the teachings of the Koran, as well as polygamy, slavery and of course terrorism and jihad—so called “holy” war.

We can easily perceive this progressive, Christ-centered view of the Bible... In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us how to understand the “God of the Old Testament” and how to interpret the Old Testament.
“It has been said.... BUT I TELL YOU.”

Begging the question as to whether they are truly followers of Mohammed or Jesus, fundamentalists in the world of Islam or of Christendom perceive God as unquestioned authority, filled with wrath, threats and the potential of violence. Those who deify any book see truth as a past tense event that must be recaptured—absolute truth as edicts, attributed to God but authored by humans—absolute, set-in-concrete, never-to-be-questioned truth.

4b) But there is another way to read and understand the Bible without falling into the ditch of inerrant infallibility. The Bible is an inspired record of the progressive revelation of God, so that it moves from use of force to the greater value of love, from polygamy to monogamy, from slavery to freedom, from the unquestioned, sovereign ancient potentate “God of the Old Testament (covenant)” to the humble, vulnerable, merciful, gracious and loving “God of the New Testament (covenant),” revealed to the world through the incarnate Son of God.

We can easily perceive this progressive, Christ-centered view of the Bible through the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus offered his own authoritative distinction between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of the New Testament.” In the fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus contrasted the old and former ideas of God with his new teaching that changed everything (see Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

In these six antithetical teachings when he spoke of Old Testament law Jesus said something like “it has been said” or “you have heard that it was said.” When describing these old covenant teachings and

In the light of Jesus I must begin to see and comprehend Old Testament references to barbarities in the name of God as someone's incomplete and inadequate idea of God.

traditions Jesus never said "God said" or "I, God in the flesh, the Creator of all things, said." By contrast, in every one of these six teachings Jesus then followed this inadequate understanding of the "Old Testament God" with the emphatic "But I say unto you."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us how to understand the "God of the Old Testament" and how to interpret the Old Testament.

"It has been said/You have heard that it was said.... BUT I TELL YOU."

For Christ-followers, truth lies in the dynamic and progressive revelation of the living, dynamic risen Lord Jesus Christ, who was and is and is to come.

How Jesus Interpreted the Old Testament

5) Because my faith is Christ-centered I take directions from the way in which Jesus himself interpreted "the Bible." Remember, the religious authorities of Jesus' day had a Bible too—it just didn't include what we know as the New Testament. Jesus repeatedly challenged the way in which the Bible was understood by religious leaders of his day. To the religious leaders who rejected him Jesus said:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.—John 5:39-40

Jesus accepted the Scriptures, but he did not worship them as infallible and inerrant. He had no problem reversing many portions of the Old Testament, and he was the Authority who could do so. **Jesus alone is worthy to tell us who God is and who God is not. As we have seen in the fifth chapter of Matthew,**

Jesus did not absolutely believe every word of the Old Testament to be inerrant or infallible. Jesus discriminated in favor of God's love and grace. Jesus interpreted the Old Testament by the love and grace of God.

The Apostle Paul was once well known in the religious world as Saul, a religious authority who zealously tried to wipe Christians off the face of the earth. But after Jesus appeared to him, Saul became Paul, and in Philippians 3:8

In this fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus contrasted the old and former ideas of God with new teaching that changed everything.

Paul said he considered the life he once led based on his former religious interpretations of God and his nature, based on an interpretation of the Old Testament, as "garbage" (New International Version), "so much garbage" (The New English Bible), "rubbish" (New Revised Standard and New King James), "dung" (King James Authorized Version) and finally, the icing on the cake translation: "dog

Jesus accepted the Scriptures, but he did not worship them as infallible and inerrant. He had no problem reversing many portions of the Old Testament, and he was the Authority who could do so.... Jesus discriminated in favor of God's love and grace.

dung" (*The Message*).

6) I see nothing at all in the New Testament about Christians being commanded to kill any man or woman, let alone children and animals. So what do I do with this "Old Testament God" command-

ing brutalities in a completely un-Christ-like manner? I follow Christ. In the light of Jesus I must begin to see and comprehend Old Testament references to barbarities in the name of God as someone's incomplete and inadequate idea of God.

As we ponder this question perhaps we should consider how Christian history can *help us to understand and interpret what the Bible says and does not say about the nature of God*. What about those times when "Christian" religious authorities assured their followers of what God wanted them to do?

For example, shortly after Constantine conveniently determined that Christianity would be the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians started enlisting in the army and killing the enemies of their country and empire. By the decree of Constantine, the "Holy" Roman Empire was then like the nation of Israel in the Old Testament—the nation was "the church" and "the church" was the nation. This was a radical departure from the Christianity of the first few centuries, which more closely followed the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Christianity as a state religion was actually a complete revision of the very nature of what it meant to be a Christian.

Skipping over many other examples, we must wonder about the Inquisition, one of the times when "the church" decided that it would kill those whom it determined to

be opposed to its interpretation of the gospel and of "God's will." Religious authorities claimed God's direction as they attempted to convert heretics through torture. The justification for such a divine mandate was that the physical pain

The Word of God is revealed to us via the paper and ink of the Bible, but the Word of God is not captured or contained by the Bible—the Word of God is more than the Bible.

caused by torture was only temporary.

"The church" claimed it was directed by God to save the soul of a heretic (someone who was not "in line" with official "church" teachings and practices) from eternal torture in hell, which was, as they believed and taught, the God-ordained end of all heretics and unfortunates who happened to believe the wrong doctrines and creeds. At the time "the church" assured its followers that God wanted "lost" souls saved even if "evangelism" included torture! Surely we can see that such religious professionals and authorities were putting words in the mouth of God. Were they the only religious authorities to ever presume to speak for God?

7) Conservative, fundamental Protestants have a rigid teaching about the nature of the Bible. At the time of the Reformation

Protestants rightly rejected the absolute power and authority of

...the Bible is not the infallible, inerrant "holy" Word of God. The infallible, inerrant Word of God is Jesus (John 1:1). The Word of God is not Jesus plus anything—not even Jesus plus the Bible.

the Pope of Rome, but unfortunately they decided to fill the authority vacuum with a book. **When Jesus fills a spiritual void, then we have authentic Christianity. When a book fills a spiritual void, then we will always experience some form of Christless religion.**

As many have noted, the Protestant teaching of "Sola Scriptura" effectively replaced a human Pope with a paper Pope. The teaching of "Sola Scriptura" places the Bible on the throne, as an infallible document rather than an infallible human authority. Like other conservative, fundamentalists of other religious traditions, conservative, fundamentalist Protestants claimed that their "Holy" book, the Bible, is inerrant, without any error whatsoever, at least in the original manuscripts. Saying that the Bible

we know is without any error whatsoever, at least in its original manuscripts, is somewhat like me saying I think my great-great grandfather never told a lie. I can believe that, but I have no proof since I never knew him. Original manuscripts of the Bible do not exist.

8) It therefore seems to me that

POWER

"One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power—political power, military power, economic power or even moral or spiritual power—even though they continued to

speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power—provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings—is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in. Every time we see a major crisis in the history of the church, such as the Great Schism of the eleventh century, the Reformation of the 16th century, or the immense secularization of the twentieth century, we always see that a major cause of rupture is the power exercised by those who claim to be followers of the poor and powerless Jesus" (Henri Nouwen, *The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* pages 75-77).



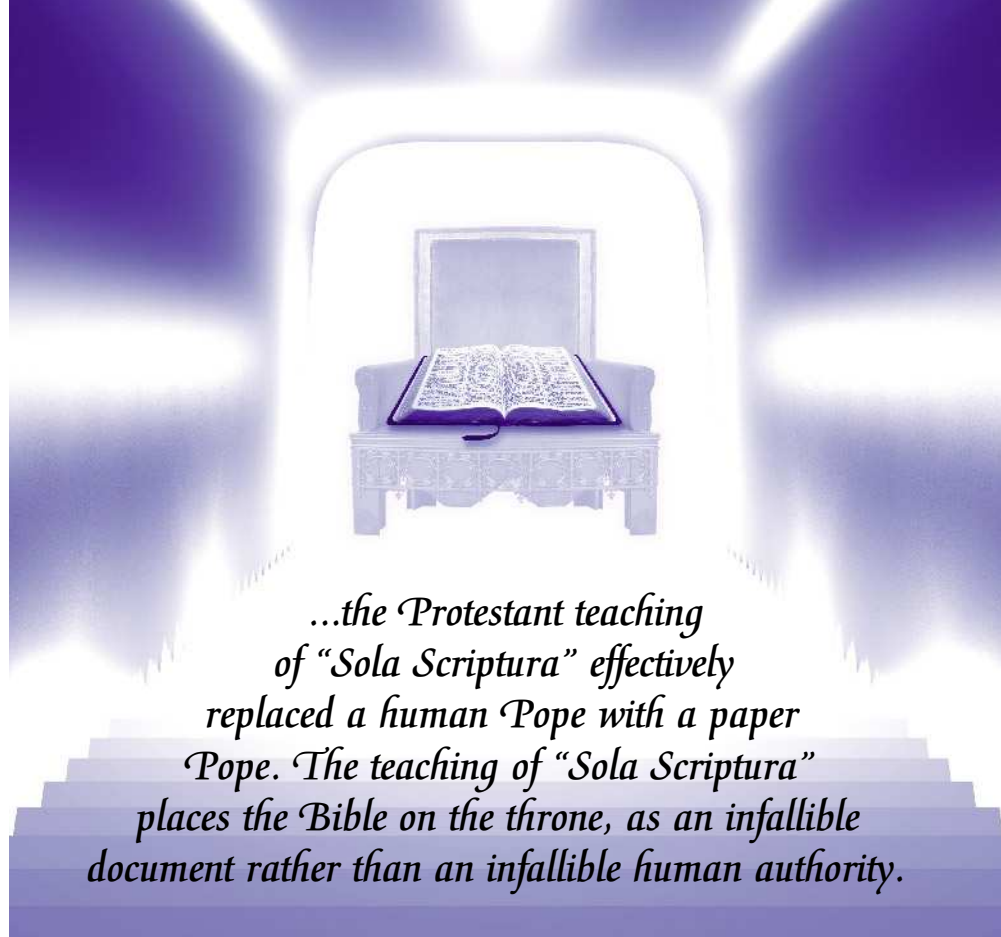
it's either Jesus or the inerrant, infallible Bible. When it comes to depraved barbarity that is obviously at complete odds with the teachings of Jesus I have to assume that in some way Old Testament leaders or later editors were putting words into God's mouth. Only a few hundred years ago the "only true" church (as believed by hundreds of millions) put words into God's mouth when it claimed that its Inquisitions were directed by God. What about those people in the Old Testament, who lived under the old covenant? Was it possible for the early authors and editors of the Old Testament, who were just as human as any Pope, to feel they were justified in engineering and carrying out genocide?

9) Forgive my temerity, but in my thinking, Jesus clearly explains that God is "off the hook" for the atrocities that he is represented as absolutely commanding and demanding in the Old Testament. In this regard Jesus cannot be one and the same as the barbaric "God of the Old Testament."

The Infallible, Inerrant Eternal Word of God Is Jesus

1) If we accept every word of the Bible as infallible and inerrant, without any human prejudice or editing, and 2) if we understand every word of the Bible as "literal" in the sense that it is a manual we must follow implicitly, without question, and 3) if we blindly follow the dictates and dogmas of human interpretations of the Bible, then we must conclude that God commanded massacres, and as Christ-followers we are in a world of hurt.

But the fact is that the book we know as the Bible is not the infallible, inerrant "holy" Word of God. The infallible, inerrant Word of God is Jesus (John 1:1). The Word of God is not Jesus plus anything—not even Jesus plus the Bible. The Word of God is not Jesus plus paper and ink. *The Word of God is revealed to us via the paper and ink of the Bible, but the Word of God is not captured or contained by the Bible—*



...the Protestant teaching of "Sola Scriptura" effectively replaced a human Pope with a paper Pope. The teaching of "Sola Scriptura" places the Bible on the throne, as an infallible document rather than an infallible human authority.

the Word of God is more than the Bible.

The Bible is a record of what God inspired to be recorded for our benefit. The Bible is not entirely prescriptive nor does it always accurately depict God any more than any one religious tradition, authority, doctrine or dogma absolutely, without error in any way, accurately explains the nature of God.

Some of the Bible is *prescriptive* and some of the Bible is *descriptive*—a record of incredible evil—evil which happens when human lust is unleashed. Christians in North America today are intimately aware of the blood chilling cry "Allah Akbar" ("God is great") which often accompanies bloodletting by Islamic extremists. But depraved evil is not legitimized, excused or "baptized" simply by perpetrators (either Inquisitors of Rome or Islamic extremists) claiming that what they do is the will of God.

The vast majority of the people the Bible talks about had no idea who God was. The very disciples of Jesus had little or no idea who he

was, until his cross and resurrection. People in the Bible talked about God. They felt they knew God. They thought that they had a good idea of what God wanted and what he didn't—but *the real story of the Bible hinges on that baby born in Bethlehem.*

Jesus came to reveal God—he came to reveal the Father.

- If all we needed to know about God was bound up in the old covenant rules and stipulations, why bother with the Incarnation?

- If the Father was already sufficiently revealed in the Old Testament, why bother coming to be one of us?

- The incarnation of Jesus—the coming of God to us in human flesh involved his suffering and death. If humanity already knew all it needed to know about God, why bother?

With some notable Old Testament exceptions (noted and explained in the New Testament), I believe God was not fully and widely known until Jesus came. Therefore, when I see "God" saying, doing and directing certain



Joshua Spares Rahab
by Gustave Doré

...who was this God of the Old Testament ordering unspeakable atrocities? I absolutely believe it was not the same God who came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus would never have ordered such a thing.

have the weight of religious tradition and ecclesiology behind them. They and their institutions and many of their followers would have me believe that what they say and do is one and the same as God's perfect will. I'm not buying that rhetoric, just as I don't buy the butcher-God of some parts of the Old Testament.

Does my refusal to accept God as a heartless monster, according to descriptions in the Old Testament, make me a bad Christian? Some might say so.

Does that statement mean I am a heretic, less than a Christian? Some might say so.

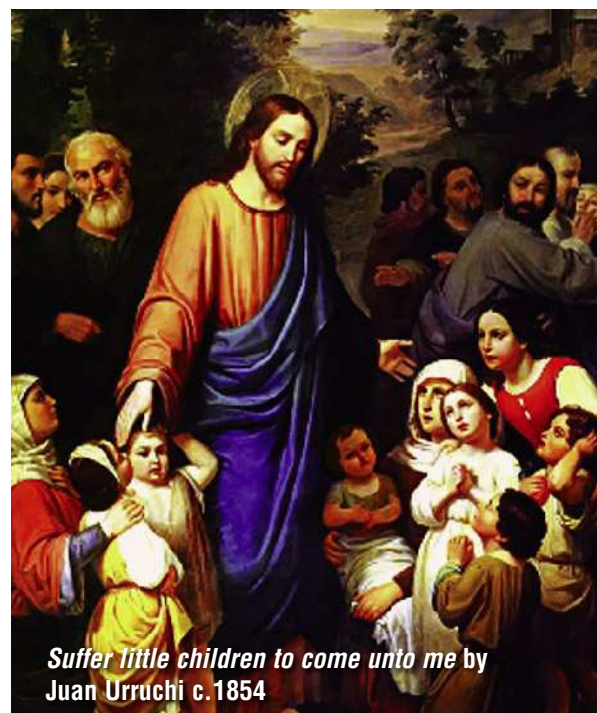
I might be a bad Christian or a heretic, but not because I believe in and follow Jesus. With Paul I say, *Let God be true, and every human being a liar* (Romans 3:4). **Jesus and the butcher-god in the Old Testament are not one and the same.**

I cringe when I hear people talking about the paper and ink of a book they know as the Bible as being the Word of God. Take a look at history—take a look at now! Some truly pathetic and corrupt things happen when the subjective desires and opinions of people became known as the Word of God.

Someone might say, "Well, your teaching sounds convenient, but it seems like a slippery slope to me. If you claim that God was misrepresented in the Old Testament, why wouldn't someone offer the same interpretation of the New Testament?"

Answer: **My measuring stick and standard is Jesus.** I have no hermeneutic (the art and science of understanding the meaning of biblical literature) other than Jesus. Jesus is the infallible Word of God, the standard by whom we understand the Bible.

The religious authorities in Jesus' day minimized and devalued his healing powers by saying that he



Suffer little children to come unto me by Juan Urruchi c.1854

was healing by the power of Satan —"Beelzebub, the prince of demons" (Matthew 12:24). Jesus told them that healing by the power of Satan would be a case of Satan working against himself.

Why would God the Son oppose God the Father?

Why am I a Christ-follower? Why do I denounce Christ-less religion as an imposter?

Why do I insist on *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*?

Because *Jesus changed everything.*

Everything! □

non-Christ-like actions in the Old Testament, I must evaluate and critique such references in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus.

God is not fully known ever—then or now, in history, until Jesus is fully embraced, accepted and known. **We know God through Jesus. If we don't know Jesus, we don't fully know God. Period.**

So who was this God of the Old Testament ordering unspeakable atrocities? I absolutely believe it was not the same God who came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus would never have ordered such a thing.

Therefore, somehow, in some way, the god who commanded atrocities and massacres is not the God of the Bible. *I must conclude that there are cases in the Old Testament when humans presumed to speak for God, putting words into his mouth, supplying motives for him—and thus they have interpreted and depicted God just like any other mad man, butcher or earthly king or despot.*

Are Christ-Followers Bad Christians ...or Even Heretics?

As I look around me today I hear and read all kinds of things being said and done in the name of God by individuals who presume to