

scriptural pursuit: what do nazarenes believe about the bible?

by rev. kris beckert

I say “Hey Bible—What’s going on?”

The Bible is a funny thing. Thanks to Gutenberg’s crazy idea of printing and circulating Scripture among the people in 1455, it continues to be the world’s bestseller of all time. However, over the last 200 years, the authority and interpretation of what this Holy Library actually means has gone on a wild rollercoaster ride that continues today in the face of both scientific discovery and an increasing desire for a relationship with Someone beyond yourself.

Today, the debate continues (gasp)—even in the Church of the Nazarene.

In 2013, the General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene was met with the recommendation of changing the language of Article of Faith IV from Scripture as “inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation” TO “inerrant throughout, and the supreme authority on everything the scriptures teach.” However, to the dismay of the party recommending the change, the Board of General Superintendents decided to stick with the former statement.

Why did they make that decision? Why does it matter? Does the rejection of the words “inerrant throughout” mean that Nazarenes don’t believe the Bible is God’s Word or that parts are “wrong?” Before we tackle the well thought-out reasoning behind the General Assembly decision to keep the Article of Faith working as-is, let’s step back and first ask a couple of important questions that might help frame the story...



Results of a June 2014 survey of 10,000 Americans by Pew Research Center regarding beliefs about the Bible

Why does it matter what we believe about the Bible?

Chances are you have observed, experienced, or know of different churches and denominations who show deep divisions over universal social issues, actions, and even internal structure and leadership. The underlying issue isn’t about a particular social action, political stance, or preference; it is about how we understand the nature of scripture and how we should interpret it. Those who are more “liberally-minded” as well as those who are more “literally-minded” regarding certain questions of how God wants us to live and act in today’s world BOTH use scripture as a foundation and justification for their views. How we see Scripture, who wrote it, its purpose, and what is most important about its words will form us and in-form how we act, what we do and not do, how we see one another, and how we lead. Just as it’s important for a counselee to understand the lens of her childhood and family history when presented with a new issue in her adult life, it’s important for us to understand the lens through which we currently view Scripture—and whether or not it needs to be corrected.



What is the Bible... really?

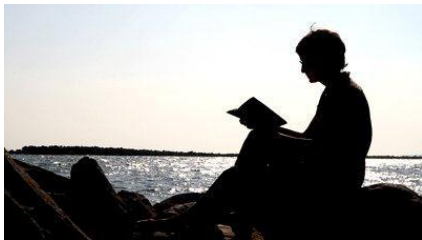
Chances are, if you ask 10 people, you'll probably get at least 11 answers as to what the Bible is and what it's used for—ranging from cute acronyms like "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth," to Owner's Manual, Magic 8 Ball, Book of Systematic Theology, Science and History Textbook, Book of Promises, etc. Each has assumptions behind it that may leave readers confused, misguided, or disillusioned. We really need to look at the Bible on three levels: physical (what it consists of), historical (where/who did it as a whole and its individual books come from), and spiritual (what is its purpose).



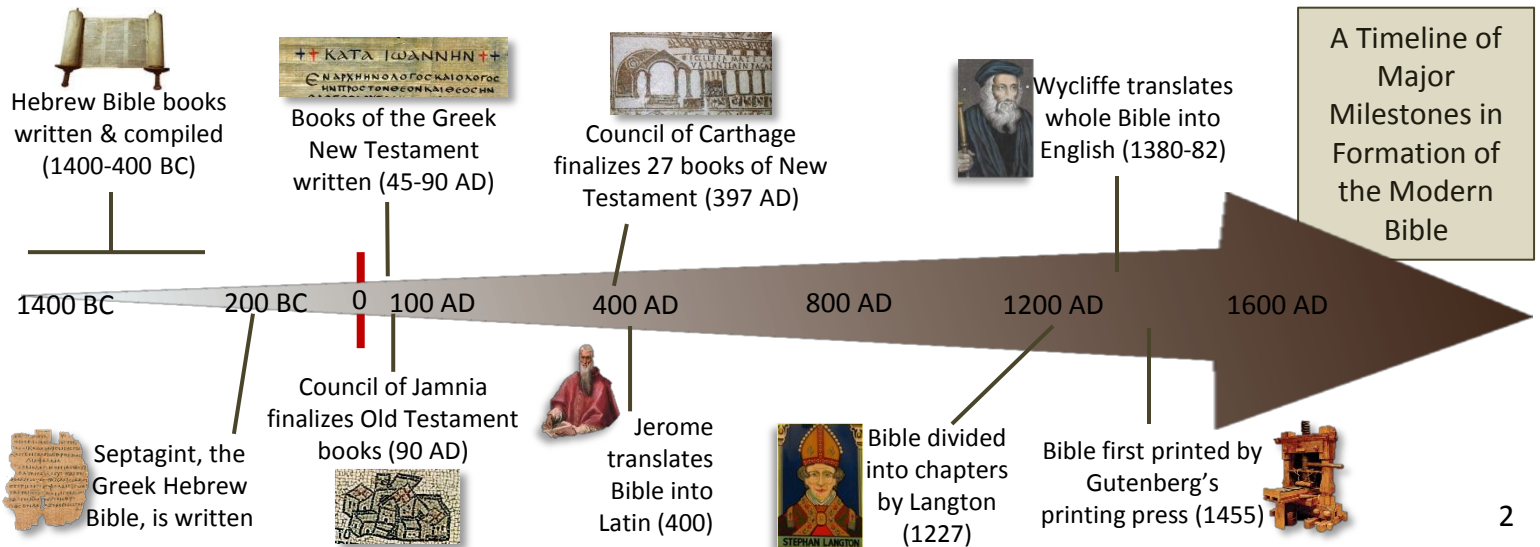
1. Physical: 66 books—27 in the New Testament and 39 in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. The Catholics have 73 books total, since they decided to include some of the Apocrypha (dare to read some—it's cool). Within the Testaments, books are not arranged absolutely chronologically but rather by type of writing and length. It's a library rather than one book.



2. Historical: The Bible did not drop from heaven but was rather written by the hands of some 70+ writers over a course of ~1800 years. For hundreds of years, its primary means of being shared was through oral tradition. Books were written during different times by different communities in different places, so most people never got to hear everything that we now have in one place, with one binding. Even when 2 Timothy 3:16-17 was written, referring to "scripture as God-breathed," their readers applied this to their Old Testament only since the New hadn't been put together yet! Even history is told from the perspective of the teller in order to meet the needs of people in a given time. The awesome power of the Bible is that unlike any other book, it continues to speak.



3. Spiritual: The Bible—meaning all the books together—serves the purpose of pointing to and describing the one and only God, the story in which he is actively involved, and how we, as human beings, can be in full relationship with him now and forever. It's not an instruction manual for being good, a collection of fables, or a paperweight on your coffee table. Through human words, God works in and through people, and he takes it upon himself to become one of us and sacrifice himself to save us.



From its beginning, wasn't the Bible always interpreted as inerrant?

The whole idea of detailed inerrancy (meaning that every word of the Bible is perfect, and exactly as if it had been spoken by God, trumping anything else) didn't arise in the 1st century or before. The idea of detailed inerrancy actually originated in the 1500's with those who followed Reformer John Calvin. A big part of the Reformation in Europe in the 1500's was to re-form Christian beliefs on authority. At the time, the Roman Catholic Church held the Pope in the position of highest authority, as his word was taken as if it had come from God. To oppose that, Calvin, like Luther, quickly held up the authority of the Bible above all. However, his followers took things one step further: they knew God is perfect, and the Bible is God's Word, so therefore the Bible is perfect. That makes sense, right?

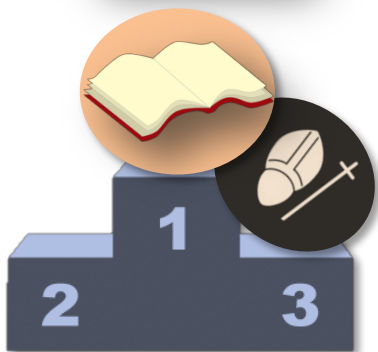
FAST FACT:

The Greek word we translate "inspired" was actually invented by Paul. The apostles believed that the sacred texts of the Hebrew Bible were influenced in some way by the Holy Spirit and also pointed ahead in some way to Christ. The "in some way" is key here.



Reformer John Calvin

However, the danger was that this presupposition was brought TO the Bible rather than a conclusion made FROM studying Scripture itself. The Reformers Luther, Zwingli, Wesley and even Calvin himself NEVER made a claim of detailed inerrancy. Instead, they believed that their faith in Christ was what led them to trust in the Bible. Do you see the difference in starting points?

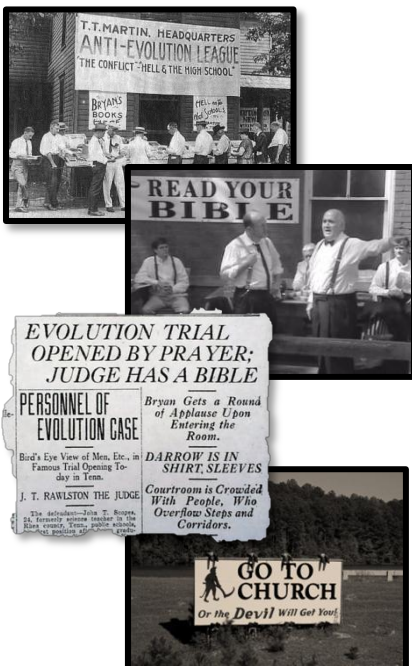


During the Reformation, the Bible assumed the authority that the Pope once had.

From the 1600's to the 1900's, modernism and scientific discovery began to challenge detailed inerrancy. The 1920's further intensified this issue as evolution took center stage and modernist/liberalists came forth. The Fundamentalist movement arose as a reaction to these questions, and yes, the Nazarene Church expressed solidarity with them for a time. In the 1970's, Harold Lindsell tried to hold ALL evangelicals to this Calvinist belief, further dividing Christianity.

Recognizing this history leads us back to re-examining what Scripture really means. If the Calvinists are correct in their idea of detailed inerrancy, we need to ask: what constitutes an error? How do the different types of literary genre come into play and who determines what is what? What do we do with conflicting numbers and conflicts between ancient and modern science?

Nazarenes believe there is another, different way to counter modernist views that do not take Scripture seriously at all. In it, we reject BOTH literalist AND liberalist interpretations and instead see God's "infallible, inerrant" purpose for Scripture as really to guide us to his Word, Jesus Christ. The Church of the Nazarene views Scripture as a biography instead of an autobiography.



Fundamentalism rose in the 1920's as a reaction to modernism.



What does the Church of the Nazarene think about the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible?

Let's start by breaking down each part of Article of Faith IV on the Holy Scriptures:

*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**.*

Plenary, divine inspiration = the Bible in its entirety was brought about by God, who communicated his will and way through the words expressed by its human writers. This means:

1. The Bible must first be regarded AS a whole, including its unique context in time, location, and history. If you eavesdropped on a stranger's conversation for one minute, you would probably come to a different conclusion about what that person was up to than if you knew him for 20 years, had been in other conversations with him, and had been a part of the whole dialogue instead of hearing just a part.

2. God did not cancel-out human authorship and character but rather used his people in spite of them (imagine that!). God did not somehow turn the biblical authors (or the groups of people verbally sharing the stories since most of the Bible was told orally for years before it was penned) into zombies or eerily move their hands across the parchment. If you read the Bible, you read about broken, cunning, disillusioned, witty, angry, crazy people just like us—and some of them and their contemporaries were the ones to pen the books we read.

3. Divine inspiration isn't dependent upon the METHOD of inspiration. Whether books of the Bible were gathered over time and place, edited by groups or various authors, or written directly, Scripture still reveals God's will and way. Is it ok if a book had several contributors, even a group of people? It's interesting that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion (which is why we gather as churches), yet we often restrict ourselves to believe if anything more than one author wrote a book in one sitting, it somehow limits its divine authority. God seems to play well with others.



**"So what does that mean?"
Some definitions**

Inspiration:

Stimulation of the mind or emotions to a high level of feeling or activity by some force; the product of the breath of God

Inerrant:

Free from error, free from mistakes, perfect

Detailed inerrancy:

Every detail included in the Bible is without error

Infallible:

Incapable of error, not capable of being wrong or making mistakes



Inerrantly revealing the will of God = Scripture provides us with everything we need to grasp a perfect picture of who God is, what he is like, and what he wants. Yes, nature can show us God's creativity, feelings can provide us with his presence, and music can share God's power, but it's very difficult to get to know someone if you never engage in communication and never hear/read his words. Would you ever have married your spouse if he/she never talked, typed, or wrote? God can't be fully known through philosophy, metaphysics, or ethics since these are incomplete, not relational, and exist in a broken world. Our brains, emotions, and experiences can point us in God's direction, but they ultimately must align and bow to the words of Scripture.

Surprise! You might have noticed that the object of inerrancy is God's will and NOT factual details contained in Scripture. Why? His will regarding salvation needs to be held as the most important goal. No matter how perfect we think we are, as human beings we are not without error in our READING OF and INTERPRETATION OF the Bible. We are always interpreting what we read or hear through our own lives, backgrounds, personalities, and experience—and so did the biblical authors. Could there be slight miscalculations or personal impressions in Scripture? Sure. Do they take away from the point that was being communicated? Not at all. This means that we bear the responsibility to use all tools and resources possible to dig into the depths of what God is saying to us regarding his will—God gave us brains for a reason. We're also given the gift of the Holy Spirit.



The Wesleyan Quadrilateral (actually invented by theologian Albert Outler in reference to John Wesley) shows the interactions between the four main factors that contribute to how we see God and how we interpret his actions. Reason (our rational thinking), Tradition (our history and church history), and Experience (events and everyday life) must all be interpreted through the basis of Scripture. Together, they grow a Christ-follower's faith and understanding, as well as propel him/her to respond in worship, living, and service.

All things necessary to our salvation = Salvation—being saved FROM ourselves, our sin, and FOR an endless relationship with God—is the purpose of the Bible. When we hold tightly to this, we have to loosen our grip on the ideas of the Bible being an almanac, history book, science text, or how-to manual; Scripture does not serve to determine the truth of any statement whatsoever. However, this doesn't mean that Scripture doesn't REFERENCE and INCLUDE elements of these things—just that they are expressed in thoughts of the ancient world. Two questions we can ask ourselves that can help us loosen our grip on the unnecessary and tighten our gasp of the necessary are:

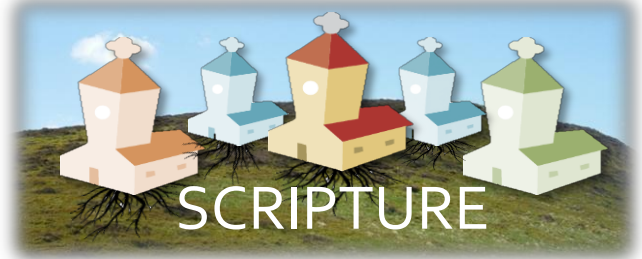
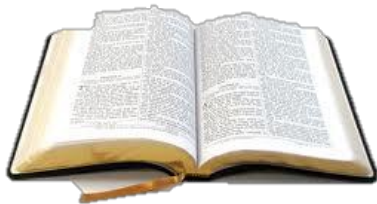
1. **What does this passage tell us about God and his will?**
2. **Is what's stated essential for our salvation?**

Is it necessary to believe God's action in the history of Israel, its story, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Yes. Is it necessary to fully understand the Levitical law and account for every generation of humanity from Adam to Jesus? Time to loosen your grip.

What is not from Scripture is not to be enjoined as an article of faith = nothing but scripture can be the SOURCE of what we believe—"source" is key. This doesn't mean that tradition, reason, and experience should be thrown out the window but rather USED to interpret and articulate what Scripture brings to light about God, about his will, and about us. If we begin to use other sources to dictate doctrine, we enter into muddy waters where personalities, opinions, thoughts, and our own brokenness play a large role.

How is the Bible still "true" if it can't be taken word-for-word as absolute truth in everything it mentions?

That depends on your definition of "truth." Just because every word might not best be taken literally does not mean the Bible is unreliable or untrustworthy. In fact, the greatest Truth it reveals is that God has offered us new life and relationship in the actual person of Jesus Christ. Once again, it comes down to the purpose of Scripture: to give a sufficiently accurate account of God's action in history, fulfillment in the resurrection, and promise to come again. The statement of Scripture functioning to "inerrantly [reveal] the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation" does not take Scripture lightly at all!



No time to run.



It's possible that you're sitting with your arms folded right now, thinking about joining the Bible Church down the street. Relax. If anything, the statement about Scripture in our Articles of Faith should be a freeing, sigh of relief: the Church of the Nazarene is STILL a Bible-believing Church who takes Jesus seriously but realizes we need not major in the minors when it comes to Scripture. As Wesleyans, we are truer to the original Reformation instead of being reactionary to the Pope, and like those of the early Church, we allow our faith in Christ to lead us to trusting and interpreting the Bible. In the words of St. Augustine, echoed by John Wesley: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Let's continue to hold the Word central to any and all words.

Some Questions:

- What does it mean to "trust and obey" the Bible? Does this imply that we must accept that every word of the Bible has an equal claim on us?
- Some folks decide against reading the Bible, saying it's "too hard to understand," "how can you expect to know what it's saying if we didn't live back then?" and "why didn't God make it clear?" How do you respond?
- Some who claim Scripture to be "inerrant throughout" would say that their view of Scripture is "high" and anything other is "low." What would you say to this? Does that mean we don't have a high view of Scripture?
- Read the Gospels' accounts of the Resurrection: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20–22. What do we do with their inconsistencies? Do inconsistencies make a difference in our faith?
- Can someone be a Christian if they have doubts about Adam and Eve and/or Noah and the ark but believe Jesus was who he said he was, the Son of God, and has placed his/her trust in Jesus?