

You CAN Trust the Bible | Paul Langham

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When Tom invited me to come and speak this evening on this first Tenet about believing in the scriptures, as God's breathed word to us, we decided that in the morning he would do something more 'exhortational', and in the evening I would do something a little different, just in terms of not proving that the Bible is true, but hopefully reassuring you that it is a trustworthy document.

We were given some lovely cards as we left Christchurch earlier in the summer, and one of them (from a young couple who run one of our small communities), one of the lines they said, "we loved it when Paul 'nerded' out with history and Hebrew and Greek." There may be a little 'nerding' out this evening.

But I want to address the question, can we really trust the Bible? We've already heard the reading, Scripture's own verdict on itself - that "all scripture is God-breathed", all scripture is useful, and so on. And yet our world says very different things. And this is not just academic, but also in popular culture.

- The New Testament was written hundreds of years after the events it records.
- It was changed over the years - What we read now, there's no relation to any original or
- A small secret group of men (*powerful* men) arranged the canon.

I'll talk a bit about what the canon is a bit later.

And the question is asked because there is no other text in human experience, no other text in human history that makes demands of us. And there is scepticism about the supernatural world today, particularly in the power holders in Western society, a scepticism about the supernatural. And the Bible, unique among human texts, demands a response. It demands the answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" And that's what the Bible seeks to argue.

David Hume, who was at the forefront of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, argued that all objects of human inquiry are either *relations of ideas* (in other words, they're mathematical statements, definitions) or *matters of fact*, and other things that can be known and tested empirically." Now that statement has real problems: principally (and fatally) that the statement itself, that "only analytic or empirical propositions are meaningful", is itself neither analytical or empirical. By its own criteria, it's meaningless.

More recently, Richard Lewontin, who was one of the leading evolutionary biologists (he was professor both of Zoology and of Biology at Harvard until almost the turn of the millennia) was honest enough to write this in 1997 - "It's not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world... - (*In other words, what he's saying there, there is nothing in science that compels a purely reductionist material understanding of the world*) - ...on the contrary, we are forced by our own a priori – (*in other words, ahead of the facts*) - adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and the set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door."

That's one of the leading scientists of the recent age. That's quite extraordinarily honest.

You may have come across a book written after his death - not by Stephen Hawking, but by his 20-year collaborator. It's looking at Stephen Hawking's final fascination, which was "why life on Earth is possible." And I don't have time to go into the arguments in that, but essentially, life on Earth is balanced so precariously - if gravity were a bit stronger, a bit weaker, or if the protein-nucleus relationship was the reverse, we wouldn't be here. And the writer is honest enough to say that "one compelling explanation for this is the hand of a designer. But we do not find that satisfactory." Very honest, again.

So, what do we mean by canon? According to Alastair McGrath's, it's "a limited and defined group of writings accepted as authoritative within the Christian church." Now, for those who like a bit of history, (and who doesn't?), there were two major church councils back in antiquity at the end of the fourth century. One in Hippo, one in Carthage. And essentially, they gave us the canon that we have, the books of the Old Testament, and the books of the New.

So, what about the manuscripts themselves? What we read when we open our Bible, in any part of it, how reliable is it? And I want to take an academic approach to this evening, in terms of what academics use. And so, there are two key principles that academics use. And this is nothing to do with Christianity, it's just what academics apply to justifying whether a text is seen as reliable or not. They're fairly obvious ones.

1) How near to the events they record that they're written?

- In other words, if you wrote about this evening (which I admit is unlikely), and you wrote about it 10 years after the event and then left it as a historical record, it would be regarded as slightly less reliable than if you wrote it and published it tomorrow.

2) And how many copies still survive?

- So, if your record of this evening was liked by so many people that so many people copied it, And there were loads of copies left in 100 years when sociologists looked at it. Those two things would make it reliable.

And so, let's have a look at some of the ancient texts.

Plato - he lived 400 years or so before Jesus. He was based in Athens. And all that we know of his writings are contained in 10 surviving copies. That's a tiny amount. And the earliest copy we have is 1,400 years after he wrote.

Tacitus - a Roman historian. He wrote the life of Julius Caesar. Everything we know about Julius Caesar comes from this man. He wrote about 100 AD. He was based in Rome. There are only eight surviving copies, and the earliest is 1000 AD. In other words, a thousand years after the events.

Homer - the guy who wrote the Iliad, 900 years before Jesus. 643 copies of his work survive. So, this is very good, getting better. And the earliest complete copy is still 2,000 years later. Homer comes second in the all-time winner's list of most reliable historical texts.

The New Testament - The winner is the New Testament. Written between 40 and 100 AD. In other words, they started writing it within years of the life of Jesus. It was completed, scholars now believe, by 100 AD. And that in itself is an overturning of several centuries of academic scepticism about how early the New Testament was written.

You might want to know, “well, how many copies are from antiquity of the New Testament?” Remember, Homer had 643 - the New Testament has just over 24,000! Now some of these are fragments, and some of these are complete parchments. They're in a multiple system of languages - Greek, Latin and others. The New Testament copies are found in over three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa.

And in fact, if the New Testament was wiped off the face of the earth tomorrow, you could reconstruct it from just five of these earliest manuscripts. And that led John Warwick Montgomery to write this – “To be sceptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity. For no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically – *(in other words, ‘referenced elsewhere’)* - as the New Testament.”

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was common to suppose the New Testament was written centuries later, where people had no longer any real record of what happened. And therefore it couldn't be trusted. That view has disappeared from academia, but its residue remains in much consciousness. John's Gospel in particular was held as evidence. It couldn't possibly have been written in the first century. And then something (this is getting *really* nerdy) called the Ryland's Papyrus was discovered, and scholars were forced to acknowledge it was written when it was said.

Now again, I'm not saying this proves the truth of what the New Testament says. All I'm wanting to establish this evening is the reassurance that it's a reliable document. "So what about the church fathers?" The church fathers lived in the very early days of the Christian church with some of the early bishops, and so on. Well, the church fathers do rather well with this. I wonder if you know how many verses there are in the New Testament. There are approximately 7,957, give or take. But how many of these are quoted by the church fathers? The answer is *all but 20!* In the church fathers, in the first couple of centuries of the Christian church, there are over 86,000 references in total to the New Testament. St. Clement, who was Bishop of Rome in the late part of the first century, quotes from all four Gospels.

And so there's internal evidence. Acts ends abruptly with Paul in prison. He's under house arrest. He's waiting trial. and there is no mention in the whole of the New Testament of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Now, if you know the book of the letter to the Hebrews, could that writer really have resisted the temptation to say "I told you so?" And the fact that there's no reference to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, apart from the prophetic teaching of Jesus, scholars have to conclude that the New Testament was essentially concluded by that date.

But what about the Dead Sea Scrolls? I hear you cry. You're doing a lot of crying out in this talk tonight, which is fine. Surely, they disprove the Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found by a Bedouin shepherd boy who threw a stone, and heard pottery crash as it went into a cave. This was in 1947. The scrolls are in fact 40,000 inscribed fragments.

I want to say a little bit about the way that Jewish scripture was handed down across the generations - how was it recorded? There was a group of people called the Talmudists (You might have heard of 'the Talmud'). They worked from AD 270 roughly to about AD 500. And they had intricate regulations to ensure accuracy. And the earliest Old Testament text before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered is what is known as the Masoretic text. And these were a group, the Masoretes, who followed on from the Talmudists. And they worked from 500 to 1000 AD.

If you work in the sort of thing where you have to get accuracy, you have to get things right, you have to record things properly, these guys were extraordinary. So, for example, they knew the number of times each letter of the Hebrew alphabet occurred in each book of the Old Testament. And it was the job of a separate team (not the ones who copied, but the ones who checked) who would go through every single copy that was made of every single book, and they would add up the occurrences of every letter of the Hebrew alphabet known to be in that book. They knew the middle letter of the Pentateuch (i.e. the first five books of the Bible). They knew the middle letter of the whole Old Testament. And these accretions of regulatory checks meant that the transmission of the scriptures has been remarkably accurate.

I'm going to get really nerdy now, I'm going to one verse - Isaiah 53:9 "He was assigned a grave with the rich." "Ah!" said the sceptics of the 19th and 20th centuries, "Well, of course, that must have been written back into a Christianised version of Isaiah in order to make Matthew 27 work, where we read that a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, took the body and placed it in his own new tomb. But for the culture of the day, for the Isaiah passage, it was just inconceivable to think of the Messiah, the servant of God, being given a grave in that way.

Now the oldest manuscript containing Isaiah 53:9 (before this discovery) was 916 AD. That was the oldest copy of Isaiah that was available to human science until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls copy dates from 125 years before Jesus. So that's over 1,000 years older. And yet there is 95% accuracy between the two texts. How many words in the Hebrew of Isaiah 53? There's 166. How many letters are in question between the two? Just 17.

And one of the leading authorities on the Dead Sea Scrolls writes this (and he's not a Christian writing) – "It's a matter of wonder that through something like a thousand years, the text underwent so little alteration." The Dead Sea Scrolls number over 40,000 parchments and fragments, and the work continues, and much work remains to be done.

But one of the intriguing questions that scholars working on the Dead Sea Scrolls are now beginning to ask is this: “are there parts of the New Testament yet to be uncovered?” There are hints, apparently, that some scholars believe that that may be the case. Now we know the Dead Sea Scrolls were sealed in AD 68. So, the implications for if the New Testament texts begin to occur in the Dead Sea Scrolls, are clear. *It will certify the early completion of the New Testament.*

John Barton writes this – “The recognition of the books of the New Testament as scriptural was overwhelmingly a natural process.” So, this idea that a group of powerful men, once the empire had converted to Rome, once the reality was that if you wanted to get on in the world you had to at least profess to be a Christian, and therefore, they got together and they thought, “well, we better get the Bible straight”, and so they cobbled it all together - that's simply not the way it happened. It was a natural process, not a matter of ecclesiastical regulation. The core of the New Testament was accepted so early that subsequent rulings do no more than recognize the obvious.

And the historical record of the councils of Hippo and Carthage show that questions and challenges were dealt with openly. So, there was a question, for example, about the authorship of James. And that continued, you may know, in the Reformation. Martin Luther called it an “epistle of straw.” So, these questions have been open. But there was such sufficient evidence back in the day that the writer was either James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, or James, the brother of Jesus himself, both apostles of the early church. The majority of the New Testament was accepted as genuine and scriptural from the time of writing.

And those books which were questioned did not come to final inclusion or rejection from the canon because of a group decision, but a consensus that emerged in the church. Athanasius, who was the Bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, made a list of the New Testament books in AD 367 identical to our own and stated “this has been received from the ages.”

So, the key thing to remember is that these councils and bishops didn't choose the canon. Rather, they just recognised the inspiration of certain books and a recognition which already existed in the minds and the hearts of believers and churches across the ancient world. So, when at last the church council, the Synod of Hippo, in AD 393 (these days, a synod is a group of Anglicans waiting to go home, whereas in those days, synods were the places things really happened) listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer on them any authority that they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity. If you want to read more on this, I recommend Amy Orr Ewing's brilliant book *Why Trust the Bible?*

Hopefully, everyone here can have more confidence in all our minds and hearts that all scripture is God-breathed and all scripture is useful. I hope this has been helpful, but I bet you're glad you got a good exhortational sermon from Tom this morning.