

# We Have This Hope

Another day, another mass shooting.

Another day, another senseless act of violence and unspeakable evil.

How do we respond when the world around us feels like it is collapsing in front of our eyes? How do we react when evil seems to triumph every day? Every hour? Every minute?

We are confronted with an almost unrelenting surge of evil – a tidal wave of horror stories and despicable acts. Acts that pierce our hearts with a bone-wearying sadness. Acts that just keep coming, over and over. We feel so overwhelmed, so broken, and so alone, that we feel nothing at all.

Or maybe that is just my response. I hesitate to speak for anyone else because we all process things differently, but based on conversations I have had, most of us fall somewhere within that range of emotions. We are horrified, sad, angry, and confused. We feel the onslaught of evil and we grieve. We grieve for those suffering the fullest effects of these profound demonstrations of depravity. We grieve because we feel helpless in all of it. We grieve because we know this level of wickedness is not something that can be contained by laws, regulations, or rhetoric. We grieve because our ability to grieve is slowly dying.

Where does this leave us? As the church, what should our answer be to the question of this great evil? From what I can see, we feel so very small in all of this. We feel alone and isolated. We are islands surrounded by darkness and death. To paraphrase one of my favorite films, *The Two Towers*, “What can we do against such reckless hate?”

I have many more questions than I have answers. I have no perfectly crafted words that will allow any of this to make

sense, to hurt less, or to move us more. What I have is likely insufficient, but as I have thought about all this over the past few days, and at various times prior to the most recent tragedy, I keep coming back to a few truths that have helped me. Perhaps they can help others as well.

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*I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.*

I never want to tell someone how they should react to anything and I hope I am not doing that now. That said, when the next random act of wanton violence occurs, even if I am numb from all the previous atrocities, I know I should be moved in some manner. Now, that will likely look different for me than it does for anyone else, but as a child of the King, it is my call to be like my Father and my Father is deeply moved when evil seems to rule the day. God grieves for the broken, the hurting, and the neglected. He champions the orphan and the widow (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 34:18). His example should move me to care, to respond, and to grieve, even when I don't feel like it. Even when I have been desensitized to the evil in our midst. I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

Perhaps you are like many I have spoken to who feel so battered by the constant stream that you cannot seem to really care anymore. I've been there and in some ways, I am still there. One thing that I have noticed with my response, is that it is much more spiritually rewarding to avoid finger-pointing in the wake of a tragedy. I feel less and internalize less when I spend all of my energy blaming this person or that, this group or that, this worldview or that. I'm not saying there are no people, groups, or worldviews responsible for many of the most heinous acts we are witnessing. I'm simply stating that when I only point fingers at the monsters outside of my gate, I cloak myself in self-delusion and self-

righteousness. For each of us, “there but for the grace of God go I” should be a constant refrain. We are all capable of great evil. We are all susceptible to giving in to our fallen nature. That knowledge should spur us to repentance, thanksgiving, and grace. We shouldn’t hate those that do evil. We should mourn that sin has disfigured the image of God in their lives almost beyond recognition. We should long for renewal – of those that do this great evil but also of the world itself. These tragedies are stark reminders how far from the Kingdom the fallen world truly is and it should be our ever-present mission to bridge that gap.

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*Prayer should be our first response.*

Secondly, we need to pray. In today’s culture, that sounds so weak and inadequate and there are many who have responded with animosity and derision to calls for prayer. To the world at large, prayer is synonymous with naïveté and inaction, when the opposite is actually true. To a believer, prayer should be our first response. Our first defense. Our greatest and most powerful weapon. (I Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 29:12, Matthew 5:44)

Prayer does not always come easily to me. Or better said, my prayer life is too self-focused and too limited. If you are like me and are active in your local church, you hear prayer requests often. I commit to pray for these requests and I almost always follow through. But my prayers are usually quick, little, one-and-done affairs. I fail, time and again, to go boldly to the throne of God with those requests. These times of tragedy remind me how flawed and undisciplined my prayer life usually is. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would commit to seeking the face of the Lord in an intense and focused manner, we would see God move in ways we cannot imagine. I am also convinced that we don’t pray that

way. If anything good can come from a tragedy like a mass shooting (and if you believe in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God you have to believe that He can use it for good) then perhaps believers falling on their knees in committed and fervent supplication will be the first step towards that.

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*We are never alone.*

Finally, we are never alone. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned how isolated these events can make us feel. We see example after example of humanity hurting, killing, and destroying and it convinces us that we are alone. That there is no remnant in the land to stem the tide. That is a lie from hell itself. A dangerous and powerful lie. Do not believe it. Regardless how you feel, how things appear, you are never alone.

I Kings 19 tells us the aftermath of the Mount Carmel story. The prophet Elijah has just experienced one of the most amazing and powerful displays of God's power. Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and the LORD answered by sending fire from heaven to show the land who the true King of Israel was. A short time later, Elijah is by himself, hiding in a cave, and he prays to God, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." He was convinced that he was the only faithful person left. Without reading too much into the passage, I've always wondered why Elijah felt this way. The Lord responds to him and tells him that there are 7,000 others that never bowed the knee to Baal. 7,000! I don't want to sound flippant, but it sounds like Elijah needed to find himself a good church home! He felt isolated in part because he had isolated himself. There are too many in our

society that do this as well. They do not connect with a local body of believers. They do not feel the need or importance of putting roots down in a local faith community. So when tragedy strikes, of course they feel alone.

But even bigger than that, when we are disconnected from the worldwide church, we do not see how God is moving outside of our small sphere of living. We might be plugged into our local body, but we still feel cut off from the larger body of Christ. In some ways we are islands, but each of our small islands are joined together by the life-stream of the blood of Christ. These horrific acts should spur us to stronger connections, clearer focus, and more passionate action. Our light should shine brighter. Our prayers should be bolder. The importance of building the Kingdom should stand in stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us. Our lives should be a constant and unified declaration of grace, hope, and love to a broken and fallen world.

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That's all I have so far. I wish I could write something that would help make sense of things. I can't. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to the constant barrage myself. But these few things have helped me, so hopefully, they can help you. I'll leave you with the words from the writer of Hebrews. It's a powerful reassurance of our position and value to God. When life is chaos we have hope – a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Let that be a comfort to you.

*So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.*  
*Hebrews 6:18 -19*

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# Peter, Walking on Water, and the Trust of a Drowning Man

I've been thinking a lot about Peter and trust. Not faith necessarily, but trust. And it all stems from a thought I had when I read the story found in Matthew 14:22-33.

My guess is, most of you know the story and know it well. It is a favorite for Sunday School teachers. Preachers love it as well. There is a lot to be gleaned from the story of Jesus walking on the water. There are the various dynamics at play: fear, doubt, faith, and trust. There is Jesus, walking on the wind-swept waters in a display of power that rivals almost any miracle recorded in Scripture. There are the disciples, cowering in the boat, terrified of the "ghost" that is approaching them. There is Peter, touched by the presence of Jesus, trusting enough to take a step of faith out of the boat. And then there is Peter, overcome by his fear of the winds and waves, sinking into the water.

This most recent time I encountered the story, I was struck with a moment that I have never really noticed before, and it dramatically altered how I view this story.

In my experience, Jesus walking on the water has always been used to teach about doubt and faith. There they were, sitting in the boat, surrounded by the storm, and they see him – Jesus, walking on the water and coming their way. Let me repeat that. In the middle of a storm the disciples see Jesus, their teacher, literally walking on the water. By this point, they had already witnessed various miracles. They knew Jesus had power over the natural world. They had to – they had just seen him multiply the fish and the bread to feed

thousands. And now, here he is, walking on the water as if on land. Yet they are still terrified of the winds, the waves, and the “ghost” walking towards them on the water.

And then he calls to them with words of comfort and peace. At this point in his spiritual walk, Peter’s words were far bolder than his actions, so he asks Jesus to command him to walk out to him. Jesus simply says, “Come.” Peter then does something that should both inspire and shame all of us: He steps out on the water and walks towards Jesus. That is faith. That is complete trust in Jesus. I am moved and my spirit is piqued when I read that. Peter knew the sea, it was his life and livelihood. He knew that man was not made to walk on the water. But he saw and heard Jesus and he trusted fully.

Then he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the storm. This is the moment in the story that most teachers make their big point. And it is a very good point. We should always keep our eyes on Jesus. We should take him at his word. We should trust completely. We should have that mustard seed faith and move whatever mountains are in our way.

We don’t live in that reality though. Most of us don’t, at least. I have never moved a mountain and I don’t know of anyone who has. We struggle with trusting fully and living by faith. We are more like the other disciples, huddling in the boat waiting to see what happens.

So the contrast is simple: We should be like Peter before he took his eyes off the Lord. We should not be like Peter who allowed fear to guide his actions. That is a good lesson. It is a simple, yet powerful truth. But I see another kind of trust in that passage.

I see Peter sinking deep into the stormy waters, knowing death was quickly coming to take him. I see Peter realizing that his faith was not strong enough to continue walking on that water. That could have been the end of the story. But that is not how

Jesus let it end. As Peter is flailing in the water, he calls out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Jesus walks to Peter and takes his hand. Peter could have looked at that hand and thought to himself, "Thanks but no thanks Jesus. I don't see how it's possible for you to keep me from drowning, seeing as how you are literally standing on water. Why don't you get the boat to come over here and then I can hold on to that. I know that boat is made to float, unlike us." But Peter trusted in the power of Jesus. He didn't trust in that power to work in his own life, not yet, but he knew without hesitation that Jesus could and would save him. He knew that Jesus could reach down and pull him out of the water, even though that made no earthly sense. His faith was small, but it was enough to trust in his Saviour.

Most days, that kind of trust is all I can muster. I hope and yearn for the other kind, the fuller kind. But on days where that trust is a faint glimmer, I hope I trust enough to simply take the hand of Jesus when he offers to help me. Most days, I am okay with having the trust of a drowning man.

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## **Sometimes He Calms the Sea**

African-American pastor and songwriter of the past century, Charles Tindley, used a common metaphor of the time to reference the trials, tribulations, dangers, and snares of the Christian life: "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me...when the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me." [1. "Stand By Me" Charles A. Tindley]

Another song writer-poet expressed similar sentiments: "Jesus



Savior, pilot me, over life's tempestuous sea, unknown waves before me roll, hiding rocks and treacherous shoal, wondrous sovereign of the sea, Jesus Savior, pilot me." [2. "Jesus, Savior Pilot Me" Edward Hopper]

Songwriter Scott Krippayne, echoed these thoughts in a song he wrote in 1995:

*All who sail the sea of faith  
Find out before too long  
How quickly blue skies can grow dark  
And gentle winds grow strong  
Suddenly fear is like white water  
Pounding on the soul  
Still we sail on knowing  
That our Lord is in control  
Sometimes He calms the storm  
With a whispered peace be still  
He can settle any sea  
But it doesn't mean He will  
Sometimes He holds us close  
And lets the wind and waves go wild  
Sometimes He calms the storm  
And other times He calms His child"* [3. "Sometimes He Calms the Storm" Scott Krippayne]

Traveling by boat or ship, or being out on the ocean, rivers, or lakes was a dangerous thing for many centuries, since ancient times. Storms could arise without notice, and the wind, strong waves, thunder, and lightning menaced travelers, and could capsize a ship and cause many deaths. This has been symbolic of trouble in the Christian life. Storms symbolize illness and disease, financial disasters, broken relationships, and anything else in life that threatens us, either physically or emotionally. Can God not step in and save the day? Can he not send a miracle our way?

In Mark 4, the disciples on the Sea of Galilee found

themselves caught in a sudden storm, helpless and in grave danger, while Jesus was asleep in the boat. They woke him, frightened out of their wits, and He stood, extended His hand, rebuked the wind, and said "peace, be still." Immediately the storm ended. Instantly. There was a "great calm." Jesus then rebuked his followers for their lack of faith. Sure, He can calm storms. He's God.

A few years later, Paul was traveling as a prisoner to Rome, on board a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Suddenly, a Euroclydon, a powerful, cyclone-type wind arose, and for the next two weeks the ship was tossed and battered until all hope of survival was gone. But suddenly Paul appeared and said to all on board with him: "The God whose I am, and whom I serve, has appeared to me." He gave Paul the peace he needed, and the assurance that all would be well (Acts 27:23). But they had to ride out the storm and suffer shipwreck. Life's like that sometimes.

Yet another song repeats for us the same truth:

*Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me  
Sometimes the storm still rages on but I feel the sweetest  
peace  
It's such a joy to know that my Lord knows just what I need  
Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me*[4. "He Calms me" sung by the McKameys]

Here are some lessons we can learn.

God is sovereign over every storm life brings our way. He is capable of doing the miraculous; healing, provision, removing obstacles, and certainly doesn't mind His child asking for those things. He may not do what we wish He would, but He always, always, always, will be with us, and will speak peace to our heart if we call upon Him. "Therefore, we will not fear..." (Psalm 46:2) At the end of the day, He will "get us to the other side."

Here's the point. We all face storms. God can miraculously still them, and sometimes will, but often we will have to go through them. However, even in the storm He is with us, can speak peace to our heart. The loss of our beautiful daughter-in-law two years ago – my health challenges the past few years – standing with friends and family during severe trials. I'm so glad He is there. The song by *Casting Crowns*, "Praise You in This Storm," states it beautifully:

*And I'll praise you in this storm*

*And I will lift my hands*

*That you are who you are*

*No matter where I am*

*And every tear I've cried*

*You hold in your hand*

*You never left my side*

*And though my heart is torn*

*I will praise you in this storm*[5. Praise You in This Storm"]

Mark Hall and Bernie Herms (Casting Crowns)]

Prayer: Father, even now be with your dear children who are caught in one of life's raging storms, whatever it might be. Please calm the storm, according to your will, or please calm them, and assure them of your love and presence. In the powerful name of Christ, Amen.

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## **Doubting Faith**

**True or False:** I believe in God.

Absolutely true. Every fragment that makes up the whole acknowledges this truth. The flesh, the soul, the body, the mind, the spirit: my entire existence accepts and proclaims that God is real.

**True or False:** I believe in the Truth as revealed by the Bible.

True. At least on most days. There are some days that I am bombarded with questions, and it is on those days that my confidence wavers. Those days are rare, but I would be dishonest if I did not admit they were as much a part of my life as the days where I accept every word of Scripture as inspired by God Himself.

**True or False:** I believe that Jesus is who He and the rest of Scripture say He is.

True. I believe that Scripture and history are in agreement. Jesus lived and breathed 2,000 years ago. He taught. He was followed by many. The Bible says that he died on a cross and rose again on the third day after his death. Awesome story there and one that has moved my heart more times than I can recall, but it has also been the source of many sleepless nights and totally unproductive days. God in the flesh dead? God in the flesh raised to life? Any adult that claims that those truths are easy to accept is a liar. Scripture speaks to it. History speaks to it. But sometimes, my mind cannot fathom it. Sometimes my unbelief is too strong to ignore. It is at those times that I think about faith.

*I have frequently wrestled with the idea of faith.*

I have frequently wrestled with the idea of faith. There are times, frankly, too many times, that I get the impression that Christians are supposed to go through life with unwavering confidence in what we believe. And if we do not we are not spiritual enough. Sure, you hear preachers and teachers say that it is okay to have doubts, but when they say that they are referring to things like uncertainty about God's will for our lives or not understanding why God allowed a loved one to die. Those questions are acceptable. If we ask the wrong

questions, like “is Jesus really the only way?” and “is the Bible true?” well, let’s just say that questions of that nature are not only discouraged but are labeled as weak and unspiritual. I am convinced this is why so many Christians live very frustrated, disappointed lives. We all know what the dirty, ugly, secret is. We all know about the giant elephant in the corner of the room, but we refuse to admit it to ourselves and we definitely will not admit it to anyone else: **We doubt**. Our belief is not complete. Or strong. Or perfect. It is flawed and deeply human. Our belief is easily shaken. At times, it is easily broken.

*We doubt. Our belief is not complete. Or strong. Or perfect. It is flawed and deeply human. Our belief is easily shaken. At times, it is easily broken.*

There are times that my intellect, my emotions, and my heart are telling me that there is no way that Jesus fed 5,000 men with one child’s lunch. Or that God became man and lived and died in my place. The Gospels say those things happened. If we accept that Scripture is reliable, that means that God says it happened. If I doubt one part of that, I in effect doubt that the Bible is truly the inspired Word of God. If I doubt that, then what do I actually believe? If I have nothing authoritative to hold on to, then on what am I basing my beliefs?

I grow frustrated when I hear other Christians sigh and postulate why more people do not embrace our beliefs. As if it is easy to embrace what Christians believe. Unfortunately, many Christians do feel that our belief system is easily understood and that it should make perfect sense to everyone, all of the time. Let me be blunt: That is insane! Scripture is full of examples of people of faith struggling with their desire to believe and their inability to actually do so. The disciples were not completely convinced that Jesus was the

Messiah until they saw Him in His resurrected form. They spent three years traveling with Him and watching Him raise people from the dead, heal the blind, lame, and diseased, feed thousands with one small meal, and control the elements. They did see all of that and yet they doubted.

And then there are those that have lived after Jesus ascended to heaven. We have not seen the miracles. We have not heard the words issue from the very mouth of our Savior. Yes, we have the biblical accounts. Yes, we have the historical record and tradition. Yes, we have the previous 2,000 years of human history to show us the power of Jesus' life and message. Yet to expect Christians from any age or generation to live without doubts is unrealistic and damaging. It is damaging because it implies that to have doubts is to sin. So when we doubt, and we all do, we feel guilty and defeated, which of course leads to even more doubting and more guilt. You see the pattern? It is vicious and it is unforgiving. That is not the life that Scripture speaks to. That is not the life that Jesus calls us to.

Where does all of this leave us? I am not entirely sure. I do know a few things that have given me great comfort, though. First, questions are acceptable ways of interacting with God. Scripture is full of questions, many of them unanswered. Questions do not make us sinful, or immature, or even unspiritual. Questions make us human and they show that we are actively engaging our beliefs in a way that is healthy and God ordained.

*Questions do not make us sinful, or immature, or even unspiritual.*

Second, we do not have the ability to understand everything about God or His plan. We are human after all. Scripture promises that "God has given us everything we need for living a godly life." We are not promised answers. We are not

promised complete clarity. We are told to seek, knock and ask. We are commanded to work out our faith with fear and trembling. Do those descriptors sound easy? Do they sound safe and comforting? On the surface, no, they do not. Look deeper though and you will see a comforting truth underneath. God is intimately aware with the challenges of faith. He understands the struggle, so much so He tells us that our faith will not come easy. As Ben Plunkett mentioned last week in his [article](#) on the dual nature of Christ, even our Lord struggled with God's will in the garden of Gethsemane. God knows and He understands. He does not demand perfect understanding from us. He asks only for our trust. The craziest part of this whole thing is that I struggle more with the insignificant areas of life. My faith wavers more when confronted with trusting God to provide or believing that God truly cares about me. When my faith has been assaulted by something more challenging, the untimely death of a loved one, I have unreservedly been able to trust that God knows best, even when I can not possibly comprehend His methods or His means.

Lastly, sincere doubt can lead the way to a fuller and more vibrant faith. My wife put this in a way that has resonated with me ever since – sincere faith is running to God with our questions, like a child would run to their mother or father. Sincere doubt is not running away from God when we have questions. That leads to a hardening of our hearts. True faith is not the act of believing in something that we already know to be true. True faith is believing in something that defies our experience. True faith is believing when all evidence points to the opposite conclusion. True faith is living a life that makes no sense from a human perspective, but is exactly what Jesus instructed us to do. True faith has all sorts of room for doubts. If it did not it would not be faith. We are not saved by assurances and truths. We are saved by grace, through faith. So, I believe, albeit hesitantly at times. And when I cannot believe completely, I cry out to God, “I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!”

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# The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still the Book for Me? (Part 4)

“Sometimes Christian apologists say there are only three options to who Jesus was: a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. But there could be a fourth option—*legend*.” (Bart Ehrman)

To read the Part One Introduction, Go [Here](#).

To read Part Two on the Old Testament Canon, Go [Here](#).

To read Part Three on the New Testament Canon, Go [Here](#).

## Part Four: The Transmission of the New Testament

Even if we have the right 66 books of the Bible, as we tried to prove in the last two essays, there remains a significant problem in being sure that we have the right content. Even if Matthew, Mark, 1 John, et. al, are the correct books, New Testament believers face several issues as to how things could have changed in these writings over time: There are decades between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. There are decades between the original writings and the copies



we actually have. And there many, many differences in the copies we do have because copyists changed what was written on accident and at times on purpose.

### **They're Gone, Just Like Original Coke...**

So a problem for Bible believers arises when we learn that of all the original copies of the 66 books, we have zero today. None remain. We only have copies, and more specifically, copies of copies of copies at best. And in most cases, copies that are centuries after the original was written. And since copyists made errors, sometimes on purpose, this is cause for concern. At least in theory.

Furthermore, since the Gospels were written decades after the events actually happened, how do we know they got the stories correct? A cursory study of how we got the Bible will dispel the notion that even though God inspired the Bible authors to write what they did, generally speaking it is not as simple as a man sitting down and hearing God (either out loud or in their minds) tell them what to write. Particularly in the New Testament, and most particularly the Gospels, they were inspired to write by experiencing, reading and hearing about Jesus. Their writings mostly came from what they learned, not from direct or even ambiguous dictation from God.

That leads us to the topic of how the New Testament was transmitted. Note that for the sake of space, we will only deal with the New Testament instead of the entire Bible.

### **Witnesses Not To What They Believed, But What They Saw**

So, Jesus died either in A.D. 30 or A.D. 33[1. N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus*, 7]. Even by the earliest date offered, Mark was written in A.D. 60. And the other Gospels are after this date, all written between A.D. 70 and 95, most likely. So that leaves any where from 30 to 60+ years between the events and

the record of the events. The problem with this is at least twofold: did they really accurately remember what happened after such a long time had passed and did they change the content of Jesus's life to make him something he wasn't, i.e., "God"? Given time, stories can change into legends. And make no mistake, modern scholarship is accusing the New Testament of this.

Let's start with this: The Gospels were written by eyewitnesses[1. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 5-7]. John and Mathew were apostles, Mark wrote through Peter and Luke did scientist-like research through the apostles and eyewitnesses. The word "witness" and "eyewitness" is a dominant theme in the New Testament as proof that what the apostles were saying is true—I strongly encourage you to read Luke 1:1-2, 24:36-49; Acts 2:32, 3:15, 5:31-33, 10:39-41, 13:29-31, 26:16; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and 2 Peter 1:16 for evidence. Note especially that Jesus appeared to 500 people according to 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. Christianity began with empirical evidence, events that could be experienced with the five senses and shared from that starting point.

In the NT, the word "eyewitness" was not merely a courtroom type description as we think of it today[2. Ibid. 117]. The apostles were not just saying they saw something and could testify to it. They were saying something deeper—that they had first hand experience with Jesus and what he did[3. Ibid.]. They were more than observers talking to the police; they were students telling stories and passing on the teachings of the greatest Man who ever lived.

With that as a background, it is helpful to know how memorization worked in the 1st century church. A few things are notable.

**I Bet You Never Thought Will Smith Could Help You With This Topic**

First, we should note that Jesus' sayings were by intention easy to memorize. They were rhythmic and his followers used mnemonic devices and put his teachings into poetic form to help remember them[4. Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 37-38].

I have often compared this to how easily we remember musical lyrics, especially when put to an incredible beat. The theme song from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is the example I always sing when teaching this in sermon or lecture form. I have not seen an episode of this show in 10 years or more, yet I can without hesitation start into, "Now this is a story all about how my life got flipped turned upside down..." and sing it all the way through. I guarantee I will still know the lyrics 20 years from now. There are more words in The Fresh Prince theme than in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, which is the basis of the Christian faith as found in the Apostle's Creed. I am confident I that I know as many song lyrics as there are words found in any of the Gospels. Keep in mind, no matter how much the lyrics to any song matter to me, the teachings of Jesus mattered to the early church far more. That memorization mattered more than anything else in history.

The stories of Jesus were told and shared by the early church in the decades leading up to the writing of the Gospels. As a result, the content was memorized (to varying levels of specificity) by a large group of people and not by a select few[5. Ibid, 33-34]. Group memorization helps with accountability. If I sang the Fresh Prince song around people who knew it and said, "In East Los Angeles, born and raised..." people would correct me.

Please understand that when I say memorize I do not mean that they memorized every single word that Jesus said in the same way we "memorize" the pledge of allegiance. Some teachings were memorized quite well, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, accurately quoting the words of Christ from the Last Supper in Luke 22:19-20[5. Bauckham, 281-82]. Yet other times

the way the Gospels recount the teachings of Jesus have differences such as Luke 6:27-36 reading differently than its parallel account in Matthew 5. Also of note is that when the Gospel writers relate stories, they often differ in details, most notably how different the four accounts of the resurrection are in specifics about what happened that morning. That issue will be dealt with in Part 6 of this series, but for now it suffices to say that a Christian should not measure the memorization of the early church against modern expectations of memory as we often see in the academic world. The early church was concerned more with the big picture and less with details.

### **I'm Not Afraid of Q, Or Any of the Alphabet**

It is also obvious from reading the Gospels that we cannot say that all four writers sat down and wrote what they remembered just from their own memories. The first three especially share so much information in common that it is certain that they used each other and other sources to get their information. Which is not a problem at all since there were more than four men who knew the stories.

Mark is generally considered the first to be written for several reasons. Mark omits a lot of material from Luke and Matthew (the thought being he would have included things like Jesus's birth narrative had he written after the other two), his "grammar" is worse (his writing is more redundant and clunky than the other two) and his Gospel contains things that are hard to read for us: things like the failings of the apostles and limitations of the power of Jesus and, even in one case (Mark 2:26), an apparent mention of the wrong king by Jesus in giving an OT story [6. Robert Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*, 48-65]. Matthew and Luke iron many of these things out: they add more to the story, they tell the same stories with less redundancy and better wording (even though they are longer by word count, Luke and Matthew generally tell the same stories as Mark with less words—in other words, they edit him,

if it is true they wrote after him) and they avoid things like the mention of the king in Mark 2:26[7. Ibid.]. Taken together, all of this leads many—but not nearly all—scholars to put Mark first and claim that Luke and Matthew used his material.

Another issue related to this arises when we see that Luke and Matthew have a lot of similar material that is not found in Mark at all. This leads us to believe they shared a common source for their writings other than Mark[8. James G. D. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition*, 61-62]. Many in the academic world have deemed this source as “Q” because we have no idea what the source is[9. Ibid.]. I suppose it is the unknown that scares people because this is often cited as a reason the Gospels are unreliable. Yet, Christians need not fear this “Q” source. All it means likely is that Matthew and Luke both used the same eyewitness, certainly an apostle, who had written things down, as a reference for their writing on Jesus that would become their version of the Gospel. Some scholars believe that apostles wrote things about Jesus down in notebooks in the era before the Gospels, even if we do not have those records either[10. Bauckham, 287-88]. But If your faith is ruined by the fact we don’t know what source Luke and Matthew shared in writing their Gospels, your faith is in the wrong thing.

So that takes us to the first writing of each Gospel. The next enormous problem arises in the missing original writings, as previously mentioned. We have no original of any of the 27 books. What do we have?

### **Tens of Thousands, That’s a Lot**

We have 5,800+ manuscripts in Greek of the New Testament[10. Daniel B. Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 27]. But let us qualify that number. While it is

an astronomically large number compared to other works in antiquity, it does not mean we have 5,800 copies of the complete New Testament. Most of them are partial manuscripts, containing a few verses or a book or a set of the Gospels, etc[11. Ibid, 28].

Even still, we have a lot to work with as far as manuscripts and the entire NT is found several times over in those nearly 6,000 manuscripts. In addition, there are also tens of thousand of other manuscripts in Latin from very early in Christian history and from other languages like Syrian and Coptic[12. Ibid, 29]. Including NT quotes from early church fathers, we have a sea of information in which to figure out what the original wording was for all passages in the NT[13. Ibid, 30]. Ultimately, we find new manuscripts every year and the more we add, the higher degree of certainty we have about the wording of every verse in the New Testament[14. Stanley Porter, *How We Got the New Testament*, 66]

### **The Ink Was Barely Dry**

How early are these manuscripts? This matters because, generally speaking, you want manuscripts that are closer to the time of the original. Date is not the only thing that determines the quality of a manuscript, but it is important.

We have manuscripts as early as 125 A.D., just a few decades after the NT books were written (between 50 A.D. and 100 A.D.)[15. Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 26]. But please know that we have very few that early. The vast majority of our manuscripts are hundreds of years old. Only about a dozen are from the 2nd century[16. Wallace, 27-28]. I say to be as honest as I can with you about the data. I do not think it serves Christian apologists well to mislead people, even if not intentionally, with this information.

### **A Story Like That's Gotta Be True!**

The question then may arise about the time lapse (several

decades) from the first writing to the copies we have. Fifty years is a long time for copyists to change things and make Jesus into a legend. There are several reasons why I do not believe it's reasonable to think that the Gospels became legends between the first writing and the first copies we have. One is there wasn't enough time—it was and is very hard to create a legend in just a few decades. Secondly, the content of the Gospels doesn't lend itself to legend. A lot of what you find in the Gospels is embarrassing historically: women are prime witnesses, the apostles are ignorant and humiliated at times, and Jesus comes across weak and powerless, among other things[17. Tim Keller, *A Reason For God*, 106-108]. Also the Gospels are very specific in details, which opposes legendary writing[18. Ibid, 109-110].

Back to the manuscripts themselves, a Christian can very satisfied with what we have. It gives us a reliable base with which to work.

### **And They Would've Gotten Away With It, If It Weren't For Those Pesky Text Critics**

The problem is having this many manuscripts gives us an outrageous amount of differences in the manuscripts. By accident (because of poor eyesight, fatigue and slips of the pen) and on purpose (because they felt they could improve the writing), copyists changed things while copying[19. Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 250-271]. Estimates are that there are several hundred thousand differences in the manuscripts we have, making the task of trying to figure out what the original words were very arduous and time consuming[20. Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 88-90].

Fortunately, the process of what is called *textual criticism*, which is both an art and a science, does this work for us. To

be totally upfront, the vast, vast majority of differences in NT manuscripts are not meaningful to any level. A substantial percentage of changes by copyists are things like spelling, word order and changing pronouns to nouns for clarity in long passages[21. Wallace, 40-42]. According to Wallace, 99% of textual variants (the differences in the manuscripts) are not “meaningful and viable,” meaning they do not change the meaning of a verse or text to any real level or cannot be attested in a significant amount of manuscripts[22. Ibid, 42].

### **How Do They Do It?**

There are several “rules” that text critics use to govern how to go about determining which wording is correct when there are differences. Aland and Aland give 12, which include:

- Only one reading can be original (“correct”)
- Greek manuscripts are given higher authority than other languages
- the type of manuscript takes precedence over internal evidence (i.e., it matters more how early and reliable the manuscript is than what we think the reading should be based on its context in the Bible, etc.)
- the quality of the manuscripts with a given reading is more important than the quantity of manuscripts with a given reading
- and several others[23. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 280-82].

These rules sometimes go head to head against each other and there is no rule that automatically trumps other rules. This is an art at times and common sense must be applied to when deciding on a reading where the criteria make the decision more confusing[24. Ibid.].

Different text critics may have differing criteria but at the end of the day, what they are deliberating matters because we want the original wording of every verse in the Bible. But to



be completely straightforward, they could be wrong on all the significant textual variants—those that affect the meaning of verses and can be attested in a fair amount of manuscripts—and the Bible barely changes and definitely does not change in its main point, purpose and the vast majority of its teachings. I think it will help to see some practical examples.

## **Who Took These Verses Out of My Bible?!? (Non-KJV Users Only)**

### *Missing Verses*

Unless you are using the KJV Bible, your Bible will not have verses like Acts 8:37 and John 5:4. Why? Because when the KJV was written 400 years ago we did not have as many manuscripts or as early manuscripts as we do now. So with earlier and better manuscripts available to us, many text critics have decided that these verses are not original and were added on purpose by eager copyists who wanted to add explanatory notes.

### *John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20*

Unlike the previous verses, these passages have not been taken out of modern versions of the Bible, but many text critics believe based on the best manuscripts that these passages were not original[25. D. C. Parker, *The New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 341-343]. Many Bibles put a note with these stories that say as much. It is my opinion that Bibles will not take these stories out because they fear they will not be able to sell copies when people think they have “subtracted from God’s word”. In reality, it is believed copyists added to it by putting in passages like these. In the John passage, it is likely the story is true but that John didn’t include it in his Gospel and that a copyist felt that he should have.

### *Mark 1:41*

Based on contradicting textual variants, this verse either says Christ was moved with “compassion” or was moved with

“anger”[25. Wallace, 21.]. Text critics differ on which is correct, with most Bibles choosing “compassion” but with some prominent critics, including Ehrman and Wallace, arguing for “anger”. In addition to manuscript type evidence, it is argued that a copyist would be much more likely to change “anger” to “compassion” (to make Jesus seem less harsh) than the other way around[26. Ibid.]. The truth is that it does not matter to any meaningful level what the word should be because in Mark you find Jesus both angry and compassionate and even two verses later in Mark 1:43, Jesus seems angry. It matters to the meaning of the verse, but does not matter to the image Mark gives of Jesus in his Gospel. Nothing substantial is changed.

### *Matthew 24:36*

There is a textual variant here in that some manuscripts leave out “nor the Son” in Jesus’s words when talking about how no one knows the day or the hour of His return[25. Ibid, 45-48].

You can see the issue theologically if you think about it: without the words “nor the Son” it eliminates Jesus as someone who doesn’t know the hour of his return. With the words, it makes Jesus look ignorant and less than omniscient, which would hurt the image of Christ in the Gospels as God in the flesh. So apart from manuscript quality, it could be argued that a copyist eliminated the words “nor the Son” to ‘protect’ Jesus’s divinity. The truth is that there is good manuscript evidence to keep keep the words out of Matthew 24:36 and even if that were not true, in the parallel passage in Mark 13:32 we find the verse with the phrase “nor the Son” and no textual variation there[26. Ibid.]. In other words, if this copyist intentional change is to try to be used to cast aspersions on the quality of our manuscripts and therefore, to cast doubt on the New Testament, then the copyists surely messed up in Mark 13:32 by not eliminating the three disputed words[27. Ibid.].

For me personally, it does not affect my view of the deity of Christ no matter what Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32 say because

Phillipians 2 says that Christ gave up some rights as God to come to earth and be human. This surely could include some bits of knowledge only God has.

I could go on and on and give many more examples, but I hope that you can see from these few that even the textual variants that change the meaning of passages or add and subtract words and passages do not affect the message of the NT in the slightest. Every core doctrine and essentially every thing I have ever taught from the Bible in the last 20 years as a pastor is wholly unaffected by whether Jesus was mad or compassionate in Mark 1:41. You can leave John 7:53-8:11 in the Bible or take it out and nothing of substance changes. The work of text critics is crucial to having a good Bible. But the variants they deal with do not hold major Truth meaning in the balance.

### **VERY WELL PLACED**

Bruce Metzger, who until his death earlier this century was one of the premier text critics in the whole world, once told Lee Strobel that after all of his years of studying the NT canon and the manuscripts of the NT, that his Christian faith in the Bible was "very well placed"[27. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 93]. That is how I feel after staying this topic, both from sides. There are a lot of issues surrounding the transmission of the NT, but legions of men and women have given their lives' work to proving that what we have is reliable. That we have the words God wants us to, at least in 99.9% of the NT. I am confident that what I believe from the NT and whole Bible is the truth about the One God of the universe.

Read Part Five [Here](#).

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# The Five Fundamentals of Christianity

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the increasing liberalization and modernization of Christian theology tended more and more to devalue what had long been considered the bedrock truths of Scripture. Many in conservative Christian sectors stepped up to meet the attack. They eventually came to see the need for making a definite list of the fundamentals of Christianity, the truths absolutely needed to be accepted in order to be truly considered a Christian. Through the first 20 years or so of the twentieth century this list of fundamental truths had different numbers of fundamentals listed. But the list that has become the most accepted and most respected list was the list of five fundamentals put together by the 1910 Presbyterian General Assembly. Here is the still-valued list of five fundamentals:

- 1. The Inerrancy of Scripture** – This fundamental states that the Bible is completely without error and fully truthful in all of its writings in the original manuscripts. The debate over this actually gave birth to both liberal Christianity in the late nineteenth century and fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Liberal theologians claimed that modern science proved that some of the Bible was probably not true and that therefore the Christian world needed to update itself to these scientific findings. Conservative Christians who were alive at the time correctly realized that not believing any one thing that God said, made all of it suspect. Full acceptance of this fundamental led to full acceptance of all

of the others. That is, if biblical inerrancy is true and the Bible is fully accurate, then all of these other central points of the Bible are true as well.

**2. The Virgin Birth of Christ** – Jesus was not conceived in Mary by a human man but by God the Holy Spirit. This doctrine has been one of the most controversial in the church. And it was one of issues that caused such angst between fundamentalists and liberal Christians. This doctrine is imperative because 1) a belief in the full inerrancy of Scripture demands that we accept this as true, 2) we needed a savior both fully man and fully divine in order for Him to completely and efficiently finalize the sacrifice, and 3) a savior born of a human father would himself have inherited the curse of original sin.

**3. The Substitutionary Atonement of Christ** – This is the doctrine that Jesus died in our place to pay the penalty of sin. Because of original sin which was the transgression of God's law and our resulting sin nature, all mankind was deservedly under God's wrath and justly condemned to eternal death. Scripture is full of examples of how Jesus was the ultimate sacrificial lamb who was offered up as a blood offering in our stead. To this day there continue to be among fundamentalist Christians varying theories about how exactly substitutionary atonement works.

**4. The Bodily Resurrection of Christ** – This doctrine states that three days after he died for our sins He rose again. But it wasn't just His spirit that resurrected; it was His entire human body. After the inerrancy of Scripture, this is the most controversial and debated Christian doctrine in history. It has been so strongly defended by fundamentalists because it is possibly the most important part of Jesus' saving work. In fact, it is widely considered to be the cornerstone of Christianity itself.

**5. The Reality of the Miracles of Christ** – In light of the

new modern science knowledge emphasis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, believing that Jesus' could have actually performed miracles came to be seen as irrational. This was particularly the case when all of these miracles were "proven" to be scientifically impossibilities. The liberal theologians, therefore, began to come up with scientific explanations that in reality questioned the deity of Jesus, the truthful recollections of the eyewitnesses, and the integrity of God's Word.



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## **The Bible: After All The Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 2)**

"Finding out how the Bible was formed is like watching a hot dog being made. You may like the result but the process is disturbing." (Anonymous)

Read Part 1 [Here](#).

PART TWO: THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

**It's Not Quite My Last Name**

How did the books of the Bible get to be in the Bible? The scholarly word is “canon,” used to describe the standard to decide which books should be in our Bible and which should not[1. For an etymology and more detailed definition, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 17-18]. For a book to be “canon,” it means that God wants us to have it as an authoritative source of the truth He communicated to us.

First, I will say that while we can know God through nature and creation as well as through our own morality and human reason, the most essential knowledge of God comes through how he has revealed himself to men through stories, prophecies and other writings, even poetry and prose. Much of the Bible claims explicitly to be from God and is recorded so his people could know Him, how to relate to Him and how to live in response to that.

Additionally, I think it is rational to conclude that if there are genuine writings that God used to communicate to his followers, then there are also writings that could be considered as inspired by God when they really are not. Any time you have a ‘right’ group of anything, there will often be a competing ‘wrong’ group. As with currency, there are true valuable paper bills and coins and there are counterfeits.

How do we know the difference?

### **The Old Testament’s 39 books**

The traditional reckoning of the Jewish Hebrew Bible, which corresponds to the Protestant Old Testament, is 24 books, or by some counts 22 books[2. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, 235-241]. The difference in numbering between the Protestant Bible and the Hebrew Bible lies in the fact that the Hebrew Bible combined books that our Old Testament separates: the 12 minor prophets are one book, Samuel and Kings were each one book, etc.[3. Paul D. Wegner, *Journey from Text to Translations*, see chart on pg. 44-45].

The 1st Century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus wrote around 90 A.D. that the Jewish canon included 24 books, that they were universally accepted by the Hebrews and that the canon (although he would not have understood that word as we use it) had been closed for a long time[4. Beckwith, 235]. The appeal to the Jewish tradition matters because the first Christians were Jews and Jewish history is Christian history until Christ divided it. Which was after the Old Testament was completed as far as writing and mostly confirmed as far as canon (not everyone agrees that the Old Testament canon was settled by 90 A.D. as Josephus asserts[4. Ibid, 274-77]).

Jerome in the 4th century A.D. mentions an alternative 22 book count where Lamentations is added to Jeremiah and Ruth added to Judges[5. Ibid, 240-41]. Other sources, such as 2 Esdras in the first century, agree with him[6. Ibid, 240].

Additional early Christian sources that endorse, either certainly or probably, the traditional Protestant books as canonical include: the prologue to Sirach (132 B.C.), Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. – A.D. 50), 2 Esdras 14:45 (1st Century A.D.), Melito (A.D. 170), a Jerusalem list (A.D. 170), Origen (A.D. 185-203), the Babylonian Talmud (3rd to 6th centuries A.D.), Rufinus (345-411 A.D.), and others[7. *In Defense of the Bible*, Cowan and Wilder, eds, 396-400; see also Wegner, 108-113]. These sources have weight to their authority and add credibility to the (now) 39 book list. To be noted is that a couple of these sources are missing Esther.

### **But one source trumps all the rest...**

Jesus himself is the crucial voice on this matter to me. Being God himself by my understanding of the New Testament writings, he has the supreme authority to determine what is from God and what is not. And while I cannot prove beyond any doubt that Jesus considered Esther to be Scripture and not the Wisdom of Solomon (an Apocryphal book), I think it is extremely reasonable to conclude his references to Scripture were the



same 39 books I call the Old Testament today.

First, Jesus seemed to consider Scripture what he referred to as “The Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12) but most specifically on at least one occasion referred to Scripture as “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44)[8. Bruce, 31-32]. This corresponds to the typical threefold division of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament), possibly mentioned as early in the prologue of the 2nd century B.C. work Ecclesiasticus: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (sometimes known as the Hagiographa)[9. Ibid, 31]. By any book count you can see the traditional Protestant Old Testament divided into these three groups:

- “The Law” included the first five books, the Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- “The Prophets” included Joshua, Judges/Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets.
- “The Writings” included Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah and Esther[10. Ibid, 29].

Now, we must note that Jesus said “Psalms” and not “Writings” but it is safe, I think, to assume that he meant all of the books listed above in the “Writings” by referring to that group’s longest, most prominent, and in some cases first chronologically book—Psalms—as a representation of all the books in the grouping[10. *In Defense of the Bible*, 399]. He certainly considered Daniel, another book in the “Writings,” to be Scripture (Matthew 27:9) and indirectly referenced Chronicles as a bookend to Scripture (see below).

Additionally, Jesus once said in condemnation of the Pharisees, “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel

to the blood of Zechariah..." (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51). By doing so, he seemingly is making reference to the beginning of his Scripture (Abel murdered in Genesis) and the end (Zechariah murdered in Chronicles, which is probably the last book in the Hebrew Bible by order)[11. Bruce 31]. While not absolutely clear, I think it is reasonable to conclude Jesus is endorsing the typical Jewish canon, which is my Old Testament.

### **The Controversial Five: You mean Song of Solomon in on this List? No way!**

Even though Jewish history seems to have a firm grasp on which books belong to their canon, it is true that throughout Jewish history and into Christian beginnings in the first century, the issue of the canon being closed was not unanimous and was not even settled with finality by the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90. Five of the 39 Old Testament books were long considered controversial to varying degrees. Criteria for Old Testament canon were likely answering questions like "Does the book have contradictions?" and "Is it clearly in harmony with what we know about God from undisputed messages from God, as in the Law of Moses?" and "Was it written by a prophet or someone who could speak for God?"[12. Wegner, 117, taken from Josephus's *Contra Apion*] And so historically these five books were debated by rabbis and not settled for good until well into Christian history in the first few centuries A.D.

#### *Proverbs*

It seems to have a contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5. The harmonizing of these two verses became to be seen as rather simple in that you sometimes answer a fool and sometimes you do not. It also has Solomon as its author, who is confirmed in canonical books as authoritative[13. Beckwith 318-19].

#### *Ecclesiastes*

It seems secular in parts, contradicting God's clear message

of hope and also seems to contradict itself in places like 2:2 and 7:3. But it may have been written by a man with God's authority, Solomon, and if understood as a man who messed up his life the way Solomon did, then his conflicting and anti-hope messages make sense. It is not a doctrinal book as much as a "Here is what happens if you do not follow God's plan" testimonial[14. Wegner, 116].

### *Esther*

Does not mention God by name. But was eventually unanimously accepted as canon due to the faith of Esther and Mordecai and how the providence of God clearly rescues his people[15. Ibid, 116].

### *Song of Solomon*

Possibly no mention of God (8:6 may be the one place it does), definitely does not have a message that is similar to any other Bible book, Old or New Testament. Could be interpreted as an allegory of God's love for Israel and is mentioned in Revelation in the New Testament[15. Beckwith 318].

### *Ezekiel*

Chapters 40-48 seem to contradict the books of Moses in regards to the temple and the Law. A man named Hananiah is generally given credit for spending a great amount of time trying to harmonize Moses and Ezekiel and did so successfully[16. Wegner, 115].

Let me be clear that for all five of these books (Esther excepted in a couple of instances), they were accepted by all the sources I listed above. They had significant backing as far as canon from a variety of sources and from very early in Christian history.

**What about the Apocrypha and other Deuterocanonical writings?**

Some Christian sects have historically had more books in the Old Testament than Protestants. From Augustine in the 4th century to Martin Luther's opponents 1200 years later, leaders throughout church history have argued that the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha should be canon. While they were not canonized at the same time as the 39 Protestant OT books, they were canonized after, hence the name "deuterocanonical" (meaning "second canon" similar to how Deuteronomy means "second law"). There are several reasons why Protestants have in response not accepted these books:

1. Jesus and the other New Testament authors almost certainly never cite the Apocrypha and Deuterocanonical as Scripture or authoritative. Jesus, as mentioned above, seems to be clear on the content and parameters of his canon. I would have an easier time believing that Jesus did *not* consider Song of Songs to be canon than to believe that he *did* accept any of the Apocrypha. There are likely allusions to the Deuterocanonical books in Jesus' words and the NT on the whole, and we will deal with that below[17. *In Defense of the Bible*, 403].

2. None of these books claim to be from God, as do many of the Protestant OT books[18. *Ibid.*].

3. There are historical and theological inconsistencies in these books[19. *Ibid.* For a detailed list of examples, see Wegner, 125].

4. Jewish tradition only accepts the canon mentioned above and states that prophetic messages from God ceased around 400 B.C. All of the Deuterocanonical books were written after that time[20. Beckwith, 370].

### **Didn't the Septuagint (LXX) contain the Apocrypha?**

Greek speaking Jews needed a Bible in their language and thus, the LXX (written between 250 and 100 B.C.), was born. This translation was not used by Christ, who would have used the

Hebrew Scriptures, but was used by the early church after him, including the writers of the New Testament.

The earliest extant manuscripts we have of it are from the 4th century A.D. and they do contain the Apocrypha, but there is no real way to know for sure what the LXX contained when it first started, as these manuscripts are late[21. Wegner, 109]. The New Testament writers when using the LXX do not refer to its parameters so it is probable that they followed their Lord, Jesus, in adhering to the Jewish canon[22. Bruce, 50].

First century B.C. Greek-speaking Jews likely wanted the Apocrypha with the LXX because they wanted access to all important Jewish writings. *But they did not consider these additional writings to be canon.* It is also possible that some first century A.D. Christians who used the LXX, and were therefore unfamiliar with the Jewish canon as found in the Hebrew Bible, became confused over time about which books were canon and which were not and included the Apocrypha as canon. If so, they were mistaken to do so[23. Jeremy Royal Howard, *The Origin, Transmission and Canonization of The Old Testament Books*, taken from the HCSB Study Bible, x-xii].

### **But what about the Jesus and the New Testament citing the Apocrypha?**

I have seen lists of supposed times where the New Testament authors and Jesus reference the Apocrypha[24. Like this one: [Did Jesus Quote From the Apocrypha?](#)] as proof that they found it authoritative.

I do not deny there are a few places where it seems the deuterocanonical books are alluded to, Jude 9 as the most notable example, but this in no way makes them Scripture. Paul quoted secular poets to make a point in Acts. I see no clear reference where any book outside of the Hebrew Bible is referenced as Scripture. I do not deny the Apocrypha was important to Jews and Christians early in church history. They

read it. But they did not quote it as their Bible.

Additionally, the evidence of these references is exaggerated in lists I have seen. For example, it is alleged that when Jesus says “sheep without a shepherd” in Matthew 9:36, he is quoting Judith 11:19. But that exact phrase is also found in Numbers, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles and Isaiah—books we know for sure Jesus considered Scripture. He is likely citing those passages. Similarly, “Lord of Heaven and earth” is alleged to be a quote from Tobit 7:18, but that phrase (or similar forms) is used repeatedly in the canonical OT books. And I could go and on, breaking each example down, and showing how most are more likely the Apocryphal books using Hebrew Bible phrases and NOT examples of how Jesus “cited the Apocrypha.”

### **God’s Canon**

In closing, I will say I find it fascinating and comforting that for both the Old and New Testaments, there is no one point in time where you can say, “This person or group of people decided which books to put in.” I think that is important and by no means discouraging. It shows that God used many men and a process to get it done, so that no one could take credit. The credit for the Bible’s canon goes to God and God alone.

Read Part Three [HERE](#).

Read Part Four [HERE](#).

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# The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still the Book for Me? (Part 3)

*The Church did not create the Canon but came to recognize, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church.*[1. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*, 287] [Bruce Metzger]

Read the Part One Introduction [Here](#).

Read Part Two on the Old Testament Canon [Here](#).

## **PART 3: THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON**

The debate on the Old Testament canon is quite tame on the popular scholarship level when compared to the New. There are stacks of books out there, easily purchased on Amazon, that explain things like how there were really more than four Gospels, how some of the Bible books are forged, how we cannot know for sure what the original New Testament documents contained and a host of other issues on why we cannot trust our New Testament[2. See *The Five Gospels* by the Jesus Seminar; *Pseudepigrapha and Canon* by David Meade; and most of what Bart Ehrman has written]. It goes way beyond Dan Brown. They are books written by people who are very educated in New Testament themes. Today we at REO will defend the canon of the

New Testament. I will discuss why we have exactly 27 books instead of 26 or 28, and why the writings that some say are equal to the New Testament writings are not in our New Testament.

### **In With the New (While Keeping the Old)...**

To begin with, I want to start with why we have a New Testament. Why write these 27 books? I think a key to knowing which books belong in the New Testament is found in why the books were written.

#### *1. Because the covenant changed.*

The New Testament does not merely continue the story of God's work through his people; it introduces Jesus, God himself, our savior and how we connect to God presently. The change in covenant[3. This is a better word for the two parts of the Bible and our word for "testament" comes from it. Yet "covenant" communicates a relational aspect that "testament" does not.] from Abraham (circumcision) and Moses (Law) to Jesus (grace through faith) is the biggest change in Christian history. If the work of God through Moses, Abraham, David and the prophets was worth writing down, what Jesus did would be far more[4. Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*, 207].

Because he is greater, and what his life, death and resurrection accomplished is the most important message God has ever given. So much so that the Old Testament really is about him, if you study it correctly. The life of Jesus necessitated new Scripture[5. Michael Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*, 275].

#### *2. Because there is advantage in having written documents over oral tradition.*

What the apostles of Christ taught verbally was of utmost



importance. As they began to die off, having a written record of their teachings become necessary[6. Ibid, 273]. Also, even if you have eyewitnesses telling stories, having an organized account of the stories would be more beneficial in key ways. For example, writings back then could be changed because of copyists (see next essay) but were less likely to be altered over time than oral stories[7. F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 119]. Also, having 28 chapters of information in one place is something that is impossible to accomplish through storytelling.

### *3. Because heresies arose and infiltrated the church.*

Not all of the New Testament is storytelling, however. Much of it is straight doctrine. Due to the rise of several false teachings within the church, the need to have organized written doctrine became clear. Gnosticism, which will be talked about again below, was a belief in a special knowledge that God only gave to certain people[8. Metzger, 75-76]. It was quite different than the teachings of Jesus, according to the canonical Gospels, and the teachings of his apostles. Docetism, the belief that Jesus was not really a human being, also began to challenge the orthodox belief in Jesus as fully God and man[9. Ibid, 77]. Many false beliefs and teachers cropped up and the church combated them with formal writings.

### *4. Because persecution of the church necessitated having books that were clearly defined as their Scripture.*

The church was persecuted from Jesus' time on, especially in the bloody war on the church by Diocletian from 303-311 A.D. This persecution meant the church had to hand over their Scriptures to authorities [10. Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 159]. The church at that point wanted to be absolutely sure which books were worth being persecuted over[11. Bruce, 268].

### **What were the criteria?**

Keep in mind that there is no singular point in history where we can definitively say an individual or group sat down, discussed what books were canon and which weren't, what the criteria was and hammered out our current New Testament. It just didn't happen that way. As Bruce Metzger says, there is no way to know at exactly what point God's people determined that a specific book was now Scripture[12. Metzger, 260]. It happened so gradually and over time, with so many churches and leaders being involved, that (just as with the Old Testament) no one can take credit for it. And so the credit goes to God.

Yet, while there was no official list of criteria recorded by the early church, there are reasonable things we can conclude that they used to determine what were authoritative documents and what were not.

*1. Apostolic Authorship or Influence*[13. Kruger, 182; See also Metzger, 251-54]

With one anonymous exception (the book of Hebrews, which is dealt with below), the 27 books of the New Testament are attributed to an apostle or, with the exceptions of Mark and Luke/Acts, were written by a close companion of an apostle.

Acts 2:46 says the early church listened to the apostles' teaching in a list of their practices and this is understood as what they would have considered "Bible study." The apostles were Jesus's students and their knowledge and calling qualified them to teach truth, and later produce Scripture. It was standard for the early church fathers to appeal to "The Lord and the Apostles" as authoritative in matters of faith and practice[14. Metzger, 6].

It needs to be known by modern Christianity that the four Gospels are technically anonymous—you will not find any name of authorship attached to any of the books anywhere—and that even some of Evangelical Christianity's best scholars do not assume that in every case the four men that receive credit for the writing of the four Gospels actually wrote them[15. See

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 108-114]. This is not a problem, to me anyway, and hope your faith in Christianity is not placed in the fact that we have to know with 100% certainty that Matthew wrote the Gospel attributed to him.

Regardless, most of the people I have read do not doubt the authors are the four men that bear their names and they were attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John very early in Christian history, in the 2nd century. The reason they named them clearly at this point will be discussed below. But know that they did not pick the four names at random. These were the men that were widely considered to be the authors. The fact that Mark is the name on his Gospel instead of Peter, where he almost certainly got his material, is a testimony to the genuineness of trying to name the real authors[16. Kostenberger, Bock and Chatraw, *Truth Matters*, 55]. In other words, if the early fathers attempted to deceive by using big names as the Gospel authors, they would have called Mark's gospel by Peter's name.

Again, Mark and Luke were accepted because of their associations with Peter and Paul, respectively[17. Bruce, 161]. Mark features Peter's name at the beginning and end of his book, forming what is called an *inclusio*[18. Kruger, 185] and you can even see parallels between Peter's words in Acts 10:36-41 and phrases in Mark's Gospel[19. Bird, 225].

In Luke's case you can see that his material matches the content of Mark and Matthew well (meaning it is orthodox material) and his investigation was thorough, honest and well organized. The people he investigated are the early apostles and followers of Jesus (Luke 1:4), based on how his research lines up with the rest of the New Testament. That is what is important—getting the material from the apostles, who had authority. For some time I was consternated by the fact that not all scholars believe that Matthew wrote the first Gospel, but Dr. James Leonard encouraged me by saying that even if

Matthew didn't write "Matthew" someone like him did. It has all the earmarks of an apostle as far as intimate knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus.

## 2. *Early dating*[21. Bruce, 256]

This will be a big deal in the sections below on the books that did not make it in, but it is important to know that all four of the canonical Gospels are dated, at the latest, from 65 A.D. (Mark) to 95 A.D (John) and early estimates are 5-10 years earlier than that[20. Paul Wegner, *Journey From Texts to Translation*, 135]. Most scholars, but not nearly all, believe Mark was first and we will discuss why this in in our next essay. Regardless, the dates for the Gospels have to be early to correspond to the previous criteria of apostolic origins. Again, the apostles dying out is part of the reason they were written[21. *In Defense of the Bible*, Cowan and Wilder, eds., 406]. The rest of the New Testament was written between 50 and 100 A.D., with Revelation being the last book.

## 3. *Widespread acceptance*[22. Metzger, 251-54]

Being read and broadly accepted as authoritative content in churches all over the known Christian world made it more likely that the work would end up in our New Testament. The canon developed by broad attestation, not the opinions of a small group.

## 4. *Orthodox Content*[23. Bruce, 256 and Metzger, 251]

Did it match what the church knew from things like oral tradition of Jesus and knowledge of the Old Testament, to be the truth about God (specifically about Jesus) and how he wants us to live? Quoting from the Old Testament was important to Jesus, the sermons in Acts[24. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, 311], and nearly all New Testament books.

This is a huge reason Hebrews was accepted in spite of being

anonymous[25. Bruce, 258]. Much like our four anonymous Gospels, it bears the image of someone who knew correct doctrine. Speculation of authorship ranges from Paul to Apollos to Priscilla. But the book is an incredible letter of understanding the supremacy of Christ and also the Old Testament Scriptures and how these two things collided in history.

Our 27 books of the New Testament bear a remarkable consistency in who Jesus was and in basic doctrine.

### **The Timeline of Acceptance**

There is internal biblical evidence (2 Peter 3:15-16) that some of Paul's writings (we don't know which ones or how many) were considered Scripture from extremely early on, as early as the writing of the New Testament epistles, around A.D. 50-70[26. Metzger, *The New Testament*, 311]. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18 cites the words of Jesus, calling them "Scripture"[27. Kostenberger, 48], showing how early his sayings were elevated to canon.

The four Gospels (John being accepted a little later than the other three) and the writings of Paul were all widely accepted very early on in church history as Scripture, "astonishingly early" according to Barton[28. Kruger, 224]. In the late first and early second centuries, church fathers Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp all testified to the authority of parts of the Gospels and quoted from anywhere six to 16 of the New Testament books in their writings[29. Bruce, 120-122]. Justin Martyr in the early to mid-first century approved our Gospels [30. Kruger, 183] and was aware of 12-13 New Testament books being authoritative[31. Wegner, 141]. Irenius in the mid-second century quotes from over 20 New Testament books[32. Ibid.]. Near the end of the second century, we have the Muristonian canon with 20 books[33. Komoszewksi, 122]. And by

the end of the second century, we can safely say that 21-22 books of our current New Testament had widespread acceptance in the known Christian church[34. Metzger, 314].

So you can see its gradual yet consistent growth with time. It is true that the canon developed slightly differently in the East and West halves of the church and that there were disagreements, but since God did not send us the canon list via angel, this is to be expected[35. Kruger, 199-200].

### **Reasons for late Acceptance for a few books**

Just as with the Old Testament, several books in the New were later in being fully embraced by early Christianity. 1 Peter and 2 Peter have very different Greek, 2 Peter's being very rough compared to 1 Peter. This caused some concern about whether either or both were written by Peter[36. *In Defense of the Bible*, 411]. It is possible the difference in the two lies in Peter using a scribe in 1 Peter with better Greek (he mentions Silvanus in 5:12)[37. *Ibid.*]

Hebrews was questioned for a while because it is anonymous but as previously mentioned, was accepted based on content[38. *Ibid*, 410]. James was questioned due to its Jewish flavor[39. *Ibid.*]. Revelation was questioned on its odd content and its support from Montanists, a heretical group who placed value on experiences, visions and dreams (if you read Revelation it is easy to understand why)[40. *Ibid*, 412].

Slowly but surely these books were eventually accepted in the church based on the criteria above and the canon formed over the next two centuries. By 367 A.D we have the first list of the 27 books we know today from Athanasius[41. Metzger, *The Canon of the NT*, 140]. This does not mean the canon debate had ended, just that by this point you can see how nearly unanimous the church was and how close it was to having the canon we have today.

### **Extracanonical Gospels and the "Lost Christianities"**

This is one of the major hot-button issues of popular anti-Christianity scholarship. The allegation, to say it simply (and I hope not too simplistically), is that there were competing views on Jesus, who he was, what Christianity was supposed to be, and that the form we have in the New Testament “won” and stamped out the losers[42. See especially *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman]. These alleged “Lost Christianities” have their own writings that contradict the current New Testament canon and give us a different picture of what Christianity should have been. Books like the Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, The Letter of Barnabas, The Letter of Ptolemy, The Gospel of Peter and others have been used as evidence that there were many version of our faith, which casts dispersion on whether ours is the right one.

Why aren't these books accepted into our canon? For the opposite reasons as above:

1. *They are late and not written by apostles.*

Let us be very clear that although these works often have “big” names (including apostles’ names) attached to them, they were not written by the people whose names they bear. This is partly why our Gospels are named. The church had no issue with them being technically anonymous (it would have been self-aggrandizing for Mark or Luke especially to put their names on their works[43. Bird, 255]) until false Gospels used early church leaders’ names—falsely—as their titles.

None of these works are dated by most scholars before 140-160 A.D[42. Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, 56]. For example, the Gospel of Thomas has too much of the New Testament in it for it to be as early as our Gospels. It quotes or alludes to over half of the NT books, including Revelation (written last), meaning it would have to have been written after all of them[43. Ibid, 67-68]. It also knows eastern and Syrian traditions of Christianity that were not around until the middle of the second

century[44. Ibid, 68]. Similar things can be said for all of these works and if you would like more information please consult the Craig Evans book from the citations below.

2. *They are not orthodox in their teachings.*

Gnosticism, while perhaps developing early enough to be referenced in the New Testament books (Col. 2:8, 18; 2 Tim. 3:7), clearly butted heads with orthodox Christianity in the second century when these books were likely written[45. Metzger, 76]. Gnosticism is all over these books, to varying levels[46. Evans, 64-65] (the Gospel of Thomas has been thoroughly argued as not being gnostic, but it at minimum has shades of it according to most conservative scholars) and that does not coincide with the Jesus of the canonical Gospels. Thomas, even if not gnostic, still does not mesh with the canonical Gospels as far as orthodox content. Kostenberger says of Thomas, "If Thomas does represent authentic, original Christianity then it has left very little historical evidence to that fact." [47. Kostenberger and Kruger, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 166].

I think Bird seals this issue by saying it this way, contra Ehrman: "The exclusion of other Gospels was not the result of a victory of the orthodox. It was rather based on an objective claim as to who more properly transmitted the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. In the end, the reason "other" Gospels lost out is that they simply failed to convince the majority of their antiquity and authenticity as stories of Jesus." [48. Bird, 294]

**Even if...**

I have zero doubt about the canon of the whole Bible. If the church did get anything wrong, it would be a couple of minor books, like Esther or 2 Peter. I firmly believe they belong, but even if they did not, nothing about my faith changes. My



faith is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in the church's decision on every single one of 66 books. That cannot be forgotten in this debate.

Find Part Four of this series [HERE](#).

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# **The Bible: After all the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 1)**

*"In both the domains of nature and faith, you will find the most excellent things are the deepest hidden."* [Desiderius Erasmus, "The Sage"]

**I STAND ALONE, ON THE WORD OF GOD...**

Is there anything more controversial in our culture than the Bible?

Maybe, but this book is up there for most arguments started and longest spectrum of views one can hold about it. Is it entirely "God's Word"? Is it inerrant? Does it have some value

but parts that must be discarded due to how they conflict with things like science and modern morality? Is it a series of disjointed fables to be ignored entirely? None of the above? Which parts are history? Which are literal? Which are figurative? The range of answers to these and other questions is innumerable in the present world.

The version of Christianity that I adhere to does not treat the Bible as if it were God. But make no mistake, I unashamedly believe that the Bible is historically reliable. I believe that it contains the words God wants us to have. I believe that it is the unique source for knowing God through Jesus Christ. I believe it alone is authoritative in the area of morality. The basis of my faith is in the resurrection of Christ. But there is no resurrection to be truly known outside of the Holy Bible.

There are so many angles in which the Bible nearly always has been, is and always will be attacked. I cannot imagine trying to cover them all, but in this short series of essays I will try to cover what I consider to be the main ones, and the ones that are most important for Christians to defend.

*I unashamedly believe that the Bible is historically reliable. I believe that it contains the words God wants us to have. I believe that it is the unique source for knowing God through Jesus Christ. I believe it alone is authoritative in the area of morality.*

## **“WHAT IS TRUTH?” (PILATE, TO JESUS)**

I have researched this topic for decades now because like many people, *I have to know*. I have to know if I believe the truth. If what I've been taught is correct. If I'm leading others to the same lie. I hope my Christians readers feel the same. I regularly see Christians—often on the internet—have their faith attacked and seem unprepared. Especially in this area.

So my goal is to get your interest piqued. I do not presume to be able to write a full length, scholarly type work on this topic. While I will cite numerous scholars who are experts in the areas I will cover, I aim to keep this at seven parts with each essay under 2,000 words. This is for social media, after all, and I know people are not on websites like ours to read a full length book. I hope that you will check out some of the books I cite and learn more. One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more.

So what is the plan? Well here is what I want to do over the next six articles:

[In Part Two of this series](#), I will talk about why my Old Testament has 39 books, and why I believe this is the right number. I will speak to why I do not think our Bibles should contain the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha or anything some branches of Christianity consider to be deuterocanonical (if you don't know what any of these words mean, please come back next week!) We will also talk about certain books that are in my Old Testament, but were put in despite great controversy.

[In Part Three](#), we will examine the 27 books that make up the New Testament. We will talk about its formation over time, why Christianity needed a canon of Jesus' and the apostles' teachings and which criteria for acceptance rose to the top. We will talk about why we only have four Gospels instead of more, since there are popular works that have tried to convince us that there were way more than four Gospels, and why I don't believe the alleged "Lost Christianities" are writings the early church should have considered Scripture.

*One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more*

[In Part Four](#), we will examine why I think our Bibles today have the same content as the original copies of the Bible had in spite of the fact we do not have the original autographs (the original writings, i.e., Paul's original letters to Timothy) and that copyists did make errors when copying the manuscripts we do have. We will talk about how far removed from the originals copies are our present copies, examine the area of textual criticism and why I am firmly convinced not having the originals of any Bible books is not a problem for my faith.

[In Part Five](#), we will talk about translation. Since the Christian Bible was written entirely in Hebrew, Greek, and a few passages in Aramaic, to read it in English or any of the thousands of languages in the world that are not those three, we have to translate. And make no mistake, translation of Scripture has been an issue in Christianity for millennia, and especially for the last 400-500 years. We will answer questions about things like translation theory and which versions of the Bible Christians can trust.

[In Part Six](#), we will talk about Biblical Interpretation. What does the Bible mean? No doubt this has confused legions of people down through the centuries and caused many to bristle at Christianity, because they see the Bible as misogynist and racist and God as a cosmic bully and bloodthirsty for vengeance. We will look at what I believe to be reasonable ways for interpreting a book written to a different language, culture and time period than my own. We will learn how to read it the way it was meant to be read and why I do not abandon the Bible even when its stories and teachings come across as offensive.

[Finally, in Part Seven](#), we will look at the issue of applying the Bible and why, according to some, preachers commit more heresies applying it than they do interpreting it. We will talk about which parts of the Bible were meant only for the original audience it was written to and which parts are

applicable for us today. Why do I believe sex outside of marriage is always a sin but I don't always kiss people as a greeting?

So, it is my hope that you will join me for every step of this venture. We will be hearing from a lot of different historians and teachers and a lot of different resources, all from different Christian denominations, time periods, countries and cultures. It is my hope to utilize a broad scope of evidence sources, so that we can see clearly how Christianity is true for all people everywhere and not limited by culture or time.

Read Part Two [Here](#).

Read Part Three [Here](#).

Read Part Four [Here](#).

Read Part Five [Here](#).

Read Part Six [Here](#).

Read Part Seven [Here](#).