

A Path of Truth: How the Doctrine of Biblical Authority Has Come Down to the American Church

The authority of Scripture. It is a subject rightly viewed as a fundamental truth by a large percentage of today's Christian world since its origin. The official doctrine might not have been formed until much later in history, but it is very clear in Scripture that God's Word is the final and supreme authority. Among many other things it tells us that God's Word is true (John 17:17), that it is complete and that we are forbidden to add to it (Proverbs 30:5-6), and that it is more than just a good book with good advice; it is God-breathed and sufficient for teaching, correction, rebuke, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). And those are just examples. If I were to list and adequately discuss everything the Bible says on the subject, the end result would be much longer than this article. The ecclesiastical discussion of biblical authority has appeared with several different faces throughout the centuries. It is a discussion that has seen many faces all over the world. There are many. For space reasons, I will just be looking at the line leading up to the American church.

No matter where you go with this the discussion starts in the Mediterranean area. For a long time after the start of Christianity, the exact doctrine wasn't truly set in stone. A more concentrated definition was found to be needed by the third to early fourth centuries to combat the increasing gross misinterpretations and false teachings of God's Word that were infesting the church. In A.D. 325 the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea met and began the practice of condemning heretics who went beyond the accepted teaching of Scripture. In many ways, such meetings were a good thing because they fostered

communication among church leaders and the formation of accepted biblical doctrine. However, these councils, while they met to defend biblical authority, were ironically devaluing it by placing more value on what the human church leadership thought than what the Bible itself thought. The Protestant Reformation would put a stop to the Catholic Church's growing pride and corruption. It put complete authority back in its proper place: The Word of God.

By the 1700s God's written Word was beginning to become subordinate to science and human intelligence. And by the 20th century, fundamental-minded Christians recognized that they desperately needed to band together against the growing modernism to defend the authority of the Scriptures. The battle over biblical authority revealed itself on several important stages inside the fundamentalist movement from 1900 to the present.

The Battle of Biblical Authority in America in the Modern Era

In 1889 Charles Briggs wrote *Whither? A Theological Question* for the *Times* in which he launched a particularly vicious attack against the doctrine of inerrancy. Briggs' well worded but misled criticisms caught on and would give rise to liberal Christianity. This, in turn, led to the birth of neo-orthodoxy with its emphasis on individual connection and interpretation of Scripture. Neo-orthodoxy was actually a negative reaction against liberal theology. It was formed by the German theologian Karl Barth. Neo-orthodoxy held to traditional orthodoxy but was new (neo) in that it was adapted modern thought to the orthodoxy. It also held that the Bible only became the revealed Word of God to individual readers.

The ever-rising popularity of liberal theology and neo-orthodoxy alarmed traditional, conservative Christians. Some leading scholarly Christians took steps to sound the alarm. The most influential was a book series published between 1910 and 1915 called "The Fundamentals." It was so influential that

it played a pivotal role in giving rise to the fundamentalist movement.

Fundamentalists and the Specter of Anti-Intellectualism

There was much genuine sincerity and passion in the fundamentalist camp when it came to defending biblical authority, but unfortunately early on many people in the fundamentalist movement started becoming increasingly anti-intellectual. This de-emphasis on the intellect backfired on them, particularly at a very important time. This was in March 1925 just after the Tennessee legislature had passed the Butler Act, which banned the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools. Hoping to make their small town more known, the citizens of Dayton asked a volunteer named John Scopes to be willingly arrested and put on trial for supposedly teaching evolution in class.

Although he was not learned in theology or science, a fundamentalist leader named William Jennings Bryan was called to the stand as a defense witness. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer for the evolutionists, succeeded in making a fool of both Bryan and fundamentalists.

But not all early fundamentalists were so anti-intellectual. There were fundamentalist scholars who pushed against this ethic. Probably the leading of these scholars was J. Gresham Machen. Although Machen considered himself a fundamentalist, he harshly disapproved of the fundamentalist movement, mainly because of the anti-intellectualism. His thoughts concerning fundamentalism as a whole as expressed in his famous book, *Christianity & Liberalism*.

Machen also worried that fundamentalists were allowing the liberals to associate with and therefore influence them too much. In this book, Machen gave a logical, biblical defense of fundamentalism and called for a complete separation from liberal theology. At the time, he was teaching at Princeton

Theological Seminary. An important turning point in the seminary toward a more liberal theology came in 1914 when they hired the liberal-minded J. Ross Stevenson as president. This did not sit at all well with Machen. He left and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. At the same time, he started the hyper-fundamentalist mindset.

The Birth of New Evangelicalism

The fundamentalists had a very good founding intention which was to defend the inerrancy and authority of Scripture against encroaching liberalism. Unfortunately, anti-intellectualism wasn't there only big problem. From the 1920s onward there continued to be increasing intolerance coupled with argumentation within denominations and between denominations. Denominations split, and then those groups split, and on and on.

Some fundamentalists got fed up with the fundamentalist movement for what they saw as totally unchristian rigid intolerance. So Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham led the charge to begin a complete separation from fundamentalism. In 1942 a number of discontented fundamentalists began the National Association of Evangelicals.

The most influential of these three in instigating this new movement was Graham. Graham said the turning point for him came in 1955 when he came to New York to hold a revival. The fundamentalists there required each Christian in attendance sign a paper saying they agreed with the fundamentals. While Graham certainly agreed with them, he harshly objected to this and refused to sign.

The evangelicals were clear that they were still fundamentalist in belief. In fact, several leading characters in this new movement started Fuller Theological Seminary based on fundamental doctrine. But they were also very clear that

they were no longer affiliated with the fundamentalist movement.

During the 70s Fuller began to get lax on biblical authority. In 1976, Harold Lindsell, one of its original founders, verbally criticized Fuller and many other Christian institutions across the country for minimizing biblical inerrancy and authority. During that year he published the very influential book, *The Battle for the Bible*. In its pages, he loudly proclaimed that both of these things were the most important theological subject of all. The book that was so influential in the Christian world that it started a movement that took its name.

From that point until about the mid-1990s there was something of a revival of biblical inerrancy and authority thought among evangelical churches. Throughout much of the 80s, the climate of the American the evangelical world was relatively confused on this issue with many of them not entirely sure where they stood. By the 1990s, most of the evangelical world was kind of lost and unsure of its own beliefs on such matters. Carl Henry, who was still active in the evangelic movement at this time, urged evangelicals to take a stand on the authority of the Bible. Many evangelical churches listened and heeded, taking a firm stand once again on biblical inerrancy and authority.

As for fundamentalists, since the 1960s one biggest debate has been how much they should embrace separatism. Doctrinal debates have continued to rage between various fundamentalist denominations. However, the clear majority of fundamentalist believers still fully embrace the complete authority of Scripture.

The Many Paths of the Truth

The Bible is abundantly clear that there is only one God and that there is only one way to Him. But history has seen many

paths of the truth throughout the world as Scripture has traveled through history. Each area of the world touched by the biblical message has its own stories concerning the passage of the doctrine of biblical authority. The story I have summarized here is one of the paths in America. It is not the only one. There have been many paths. And these paths, wherever they may be, continue on. Isaiah 40:6-8 says humans are like grass and our faith like flowers. It says that grass may wither, and its flowers may fall, but it says the Word of God endures forever. The battle over biblical authority continues. People may fail. Human faith may wane. But no matter what the Word of God and its authority will endure forever.

No, The Greek Doesn't Reveal Secret Bible Meaning, But It Helps

"Well, I Use the Greek"

One of my favorite things I've heard Dr. Robert Picirilli say is that when talking about Bible interpretation in small groups or informal conversation, people always want to know, "Well, what does the Greek say?" It's a fair question if you understand how God gave us the Bible, and specifically the New Testament.

I didn't take Greek as an undergrad at Welch College because I was a youth ministry major and it wasn't required. And when I started grad school several years ago at Moody Theological Seminary, it still wasn't required for my degree. Yet being older and wiser, I delayed graduation to take all of the

classes they had on the subject.

The first two courses were great, and it was a lot of vocabulary and translation. The third, with perhaps my favorite professor ever, Dr. Julius Wong Loi Sing, was the most beneficial for several reasons.

First, and most importantly, he taught us that if you learn to read the New Testament in Greek and it makes you proud instead of humble, then you are reading but not understanding. Which is utterly useless to the Kingdom of God. I'll never forget this quote: "You are not supposed to dominate the Bible; it is supposed to dominate you."

Second, he told us that Greek should be like your underwear; you should use it but people should not be aware of it. In other words, do not constantly and haughtily make everything about, "Well the original Greek says..." and "Now if you understand the Greek syntax Paul uses here..." And lastly, and the point of this article, he taught us that Greek does not contain some kind of hidden, secret meaning to Bible texts. But it does help.

Last year for Rambling Ever On, I wrote an article called *#Blessed: The Beatitudes As Modern Day Facebook Statuses*, which if you would like you can read [here](#). In that article I tried to practice Dr. Wong Loi Sing's advice about the underwear. Yet I think it could be interesting for the readers of REO to see how things go behind the scenes of an article like that, because it says something about the way God communicated the Bible to us.

First, I want to look at Matthew 5:3-16 in English. You don't have to read this to get what I am wanting you to see. Just survey it quickly:

3 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom*

of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **16** Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

First, note a couple of things. One, the translation I used (the NASB) separates vs. 13-16 from vs. 3-12. Two, there is little about vs. 3-12 that gives any sense of separation within these verses.

Now, I want to show you these verses in Greek. I just want you to look at them. You do not have to understand one iota of Greek to get what I am trying to communicate here. In fact, to save time and space I'm going to go ahead and highlight some things that stand out to me:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

7 μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται.

8 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται.

9 μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται.

10 μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

11 μακάριοί ἐστε ὅταν ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ διώξωσιν καὶ εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν ψευδόμενοι ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ. **12** χαίrete καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφῆτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν.

13 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ, ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται; εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ἔτι εἰ μὴ βληθὲν ἔξω καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

14 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. οὐ δύναται πόλις κρυβῆναι ἐπάνω ὄρους κειμένη· **15** οὐδὲ καίουσιν λύχνον καὶ τιθέασιν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τὸν μόδιον ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν λυχνίαν, καὶ λάμπει πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ. **16** οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

A couple of things to notice, which are made easy by my highlights. First, there is a contrast in verses 10 and 11. You can see it in English as it changes from “Blessed are the/those” to “Blessed are you”. But for some reason I never saw it until the first time I read it in Greek. Perhaps because the English obscures the consistency of verses 3-10 by switching between “the” and “those”. In Greek the form is exactly the same every time.

I think the change from vs. 10 to 11 is significant. If I wear khaki pants and a blue shirt eight days in a row and then on the ninth day I wear blue jeans and a blue shirt you will wonder why I changed. The same is true for understanding biblical authors in how they write.

I personally think the change is there because Jesus gives eight beatitudes (vs. 3-10) and vs. 11 begins a commentary on the last one about being persecuted. This sharp change in the passage can also be seen without any hindrance in English by the use of “for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven” in verses 3 and 10. This creates a bun type affect of the passage.

The commentary on persecution, in my opinion, continues through vs. 16 and this can also be seen in my highlights by use of “You are” and other forms of “you” from vs. 11 to vs. 16. In fact, if I play around with the English a little, you can see it even more clearly in English than Greek:

3 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

4 *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

5 *"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

8 *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

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10 *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *"Blessed you are when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

13 *"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.*

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Now you may ask, "What difference does it make?" Well maybe

not much. But as a preacher I have to confess, knowing that verses 13-16 should not be separated from vs. 11-12 (or from vs. 1-10) then it affects my interpretation of verses 13-16. How often do you see a new subheading in Bibles over vs. 13? What if I told you that shining your light before men, in context, was directly linked to being persecuted? Does it change your understanding of the verse? Or its application?

One more thing I want you see this, this time only in verses 3-6:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ **πτωχοὶ** τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ **πενθοῦντες**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ **πραεῖς**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ **πεινῶντες** καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

Notice that the four words are alliterated, beginning with the same Greek letter you may recognize from math class as Pi (though I was taught to pronounce it with a long 'e' instead of a long 'i'). I know some people find outline alliteration annoying in modern preaching but it's used here. What does that mean? Perhaps nothing. After all, vs. 7-10 are not alliterated. Yet, I think it probably means that vs. 3-6 are one subgroup of the Beatitudes and vs. 7-10 are a second group. Even further, I think if you study them you will see that it could be that vs. 3-6 deal with man's relationship to God and vs. 7-10 deal with man's relationship to other men. This follows the pattern of both the Ten Commandments and The Great Commandment given by Jesus.

And this absolutely changes how I interpret the Beatitudes,

especially vs. 8 which I interpret differently than you probably have ever heard. If you want to read more about that interpretation you can read the article the I linked at the beginning of this article or you can go [here](#). Note that I don't think that my interpretation is undoubtedly correct or beyond reproach, but that I got there by study and not some crazy, baseless theory.

Again, it has been my aim to be informative without being pedantic and helpful without being condescending. I am no Greek expert and never will be. But I have benefited from it and I hope that I can help others see its benefit. God did, after all, reduce himself to human language to give us the main source of truth we have.

Questions? Comments? Let us know below!

“Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation”: A Review

“I wish I could single-handedly revive the art of Scripture memorization in our homes and our churches. There's no greater legacy to bequeath to our children than a storehouse of memory verses to draw upon their whole lives through.” (Robert J.

Morgan)

The Title Made Me Feel Bad (In a Good Way)

I can't recall a time in my life when a book title convicted me like this one did. If there is one thing I know I should do but don't do often enough, it's biblical meditation. So I got this book as quickly as I could and read it carefully.

I'll go ahead and abandon any pretense that this "review" will offer any substantial critique of what Dr. Morgan writes here. I think it is dangerous to put people on pedestals where they cannot be critiqued, but my main goal here is to try to influence people to read this book because the content is so important. Any criticisms I have are extremely superficial and will succumb to the weight of the Dr. Morgan's central message.

Evangelical Crusades and Hannibal Lector Bring it Home

The content portion of the book is a tidy 123 pages and I knocked it out in a couple of days in probably less than three hours total. It reads simply enough that I would think an average 9-year old could understand it. But that is not an insult because it's chock full of extremely helpful advice, Scripture references and practical illustrations that I hope not only inspire me but also guide me at 39 years old to make Scripture meditation a bigger part of my life. I've been a pastor for 15 years. I have attended two exceptional Bible Colleges. I have memorized and meditated on Scripture before. But as I alluded to above, I have never made it a habit and such an integral part of my life as you can tell Dr. Morgan has.

Anyone who knows Dr. Morgan or has sat under his preaching

knows that you can count on two things with everything he teaches: First, he will incorporate a ton of Bible. I remember once when I was at a service at Donelson, Dr. Morgan's church in Nashville, his ministry cohort Jeff Nichols joked from the stage that when he takes notes on Rob's sermons he can count on there being like 17 well thought-out Scripture references in support of each point. Secondly, he will show you how diversely read he is by citing an insane amount of biographical information and quotes from people from centuries ago and people from today. Just look at the footnotes in the back of this book and marvel not only of his use of Billy Graham and J.I. Packer, but also Anthony Hopkins and Stephen King. And also his use of people I do not know but that he knows personally and had invaluable wisdom to offer for this book.

And what he does by quoting the sacred and the secular is build a very simple yet very powerful case for how valuable meditation is for learning and behavior. The amount of times the Bible refers to meditation, even if it doesn't use that word, is legion. Old Testament, New Testament, historical books, psalms, prophets, gospels, letters...every section has significant contributions here and that makes this material impossible to ignore.

We Don't Meditate Because We Are Good; We Meditate **Because We're Not**

I confess I appreciate as well how Dr. Morgan weaves in at times his own personal weaknesses and struggles that have led him to be a better meditator. It is easy for someone like me to look at his lengthy pastoral and preaching ministry and to idealize it. But he does not allow for that. He no doubt practices biblical meditation as well as anyone I know and has earned the right to write this book, but he allows us to see that meditation exists in large part because we are so flawed

and weak. We must meditate because we know God so poorly on our own. Our minds are so bent to evil and darkness, worry and anxiety, that meditation is as much like medicine for the sinful soul as it is exercise for the mind. I daresay that is what separates Christian meditation from things like Zen Buddhism. The book is definitely written humbly and not haughtily and I am positive that when a person meditates constantly on the Bible, teaching others to do well will likely be from a place of humility. That's how the Bible works in teaching us about how we relate to God.

The 'tips' interspersed are so practical, yet not often practiced. At least by me. I am praying that will change. Sticky notes will be easy. Sharing my meditation with people I come across during the day will be hard. But I will try both, and many other things he advises.

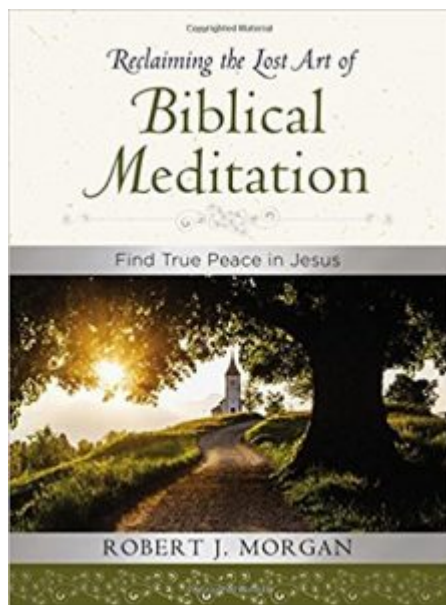
Dr. Morgan lists several times we should meditate—when we wake up in the morning, when we wake up in the middle of the night, when we are lonely, when we are on a plane, when we drive, etc. Basically, we can mediate constantly. At that point the conviction of the book title came and hit me full in the face. I meditate so infrequently. I am too easily distracted. I have little doubt the content of the book, notably the Scriptures within, will change my course on this. I pray that it lasts til I die and is not a short lived emotional response.

Buy It. Read It. Do It.

I hope this book helps millions as it has helped my thinking (and, in theory, my behavior). I am challenged to put the phone down more and to focus my thoughts on Scripture and the nature of God more often. I know that Biblical meditation is not a quick fix to all anxiety and depression and crises. But it is a way to know God better and to allow him to change us even if he does not change our circumstances. These things

will always be better for us than having everything “fixed”. If we are to know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering and if we are to take every thought captive, we must meditate. Dr. Morgan’s book is an extremely beneficial resource to challenge and guide even older Christians in this discipline.

Buy the book by clicking the picture below:



On Stories, Questions, and the Power of the One True Myth

The story goes something like this...

The young man, with the weight of the world on his shoulders, walks willingly to his death. He knows that his sacrifice is

the only thing that can save the world. His enemies mock and reject him and finally, the killing blow is struck. But death is not his destiny. He returns triumphantly and destroys the great evil of the world, once and for all.

I am sure you have heard this story. It is one of the most famous stories every told. It is a story of selfless sacrifice and ultimate redemption. Sadly, in many ways, it feels quite disconnected from the story of our life. The story of our life is full of questions. Every day it seems we are faced with new doubts and worries. Things don't seem to add up. Often, we find ourselves face-to-face with the unexpected. Less often, we find ourselves face-to-face with something much worse: A tragedy. A loss. A piercingly specific moment that slices through our carefully constructed armor right to our very core. It's these moments, these wounds that can break us. At the very least, they leave us battered and in pain. These moments also leave us with some fundamental questions: Is God powerful enough to take our wounds and our brokenness and turn them into something beautiful? Can He redeem our suffering and give us our own happily ever after?

Is God powerful enough to take our wounds and our brokenness and turn them into something beautiful?

For a believer, the easy answer is always yes. That is the quick response. The answer from our heads. The heart, on the other hand, is not always so trusting. If life can be viewed as one all-encompassing story, then we are all actors on the page as well as readers of the text. Yet sometimes, it is as if the head and the heart are reading a wholly different story. The words are the same. The verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs adding up to the same sentences and thoughts, yet conveying vastly different things, depending on the reader.

The head reads those words, those sentences, and it sees clarity and a plan. It reads Isaiah 46:10[1. Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure;'] after a devastating loss and it sees the hand of God writing a grand masterpiece. The heart sees those same words, those same sentences, and it feels confusion, chaos and pain. It reads Ephesians 3:20[2. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us.] and it feels a grand distance between itself and the God of the heavens.

As image-bearers of the Holy God, our souls intuitively understand certain things. Without getting too theological, something I am not qualified to do, our souls were created to know God. We were created to find our full satisfaction in Him. Nothing else will do[3. John 14:6]. We were created with the ability to know right from wrong at its most elementary level.[4. Romans 1:20, Romans 2:14, Ecclesiastes 3:11] God is a God of order[5. The evidence of divine order is everywhere. Mathematics – [Link](#), [Link](#) and planetary movement – [Link](#), [Link](#) are just two examples that testify to God's guiding touch.] with all things ordained and sustained by His omnipotent hand.[6. Job 12:7-10, Psalm 94:4-5, Hebrews 1:3] If it is true that we bear His image, and it is[7. Genesis 1:26-27], then it makes sense that we share some commonalities. We react to chaos, pain, death, fear, and questions in the only way that makes sense for an image-bearer to do. Those things do not make sense to us. Our hearts and souls feel the wrongness of them. We want things to add up, to fit. Good, and all its connected implications, must prevail. Evil, and all its connected implications, must be defeated. In other words, our souls cry out for completeness.

If you really keep your eyes open, you

can catch glimmers of the deeper story all over the place.

Humanity itself, though fallen, reflects this desire for order and wholeness. Our stories are rife with it. You do not have to look hard to find examples. The beautiful maiden falls in love with the prince and they live happily ever after. A boy pulls a sword from a stone and becomes a king. The young moisture farmer learns to use the Force and helps bring down the evil Empire. I could go on and on.

But it goes deeper than this. If you pay attention, if you really keep your eyes open, you can catch glimmers of the deeper story all over the place, some intentional and some very much not. Neo's (*The Matrix*) hero journey includes a death, a resurrection, and a vanquishing of evil. E.T. (*E.T. The Extraterrestrial*) dies and comes back to life, performs signs and wonders and ascends to the heavens. Atticus Finch (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) is reviled by the people of his time for taking a stand for the good. In more obvious examples, Gandalf the Grey (*The Lord of the Rings*) sacrifices himself for those he loves and is resurrected in a glorified state. Aslan the lion (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), takes the place of the one who deserves to die, and is sacrificed on an altar. He rises from the dead and returns to destroy evil.

God, in His divine sense of timing, invaded our story at just the right moment to tell His True Myth.

Remember the story that opened the article? Do you recognize it? It is the modern classic, *Harry Potter*. Author J.K. Rowling meant for there to be a strong spiritual connection. She realized that the story she was telling drew its power from the Great Story that has been told from the dawn of the

universe. The *True Myth*, as J.R.R. Tolkien called it[8. [Link](#)]. Tolkien argued that the great story of redemption has been retold all over the world because it is built into the very fabric of our souls. We long for that sense of rightness. God, in His perfect timing, invaded our story at just the right moment to tell His True Myth. That is the Gospel. That is the story we are all connected to, whether we know it or admit it.

Many choose not to know or admit it. It would be disingenuous of me to fail to acknowledge the strong pushback from our culture when it comes to tapping into the True Myth. It is not a new trend. There will always be those that do all they can to tell stories that run in opposition to the classic good overcomes evil dynamic. And there will always be stories where the “good” guys don’t win in the end. Or, there are no real “good” guys to be found. No right and wrong, no sense of order or completeness. No happily ever after. One of the most popular book and TV series of all time, George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, better known as *Game of Thrones*, revels in the notion that the “good” guys (if there are any) cannot possibly win. To be fair, the story is not complete so we cannot know for sure how Martin will conclude his epic saga, but all signs point to a survival of the fittest and most cunning resolution.

Our hearts yearn for a fulfillment only the True Myth can provide.

Additionally, critics will argue that these stories—where good prevails, where things fit together at the end, and where our hero lives happily ever after—are just a form of wish fulfillment. On some level, they are right. Many “happy ending” stories are lazy and uninspired by any true connection to something deeper and more lasting. They appeal to the part of us that craves happiness above all else instead of the part that desires something more substantial. The very best of our

stories reflect the power of the True Myth by showing the struggle, the pain, the heartache, for without all of these things, there can be no triumph, healing, or peace. The stories, the ones connected to the True Myth, are absolutely wish fulfillment. Our hearts yearn for a fulfillment only the True Myth can provide.



In *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien chronicles the creation and history of Middle Earth. (Frankly, it's much more complex than that but I hesitate to go full-nerd in fear of losing any readers.) The story opens with Eru Ilúvatar, the God of the universe, calling the world into existence. Early on, he creates the Ainur, angelic or godlike creatures that will be his companions and helpers in this act of creation. He tasks them with singing

the rest of creation into being. At first, the Ainur do their job well. It is then that Melkor, the most powerful of the Ainur, decides to stand apart and sing in contrast with the rest. Disharmony and discord reign. Smiling, Eru rejoins the singing, introducing a second theme of song, meant to tie in with the first theme. Melkor grows more "loud and vain and arrogant" in his disruption, which causes Eru to respond sternly. He produces a theme so powerful that it works in unison with the first two themes as well as Melkor's attempt to overpower all. It is this third and final musical theme

that brings forth the Elves and men in the climactic moment of creation.

There is another story where the Creator speaks the universe into existence. After the time of creation is completed, all things are as they should be. It is all good. The highest expression of this goodness is humanity, made in the very image of the Creator that formed them. They are placed in a perfect world, with everything they could ever want or need. Instead of living in obedience and peace, they choose to disobey, bringing an end to their happily ever after. They are banished and their communion with the Creator is broken. This does not stop the Creator from telling his story. Though the grand act of creation is complete, the epic story of his love for humanity is just beginning. Across the millennia, traversing miles and continents, the Creator reveals himself and his love. It culminates with the sending of his son to pay the wages of humanity's disobedience, all those years ago. The wounds are healed. The heartache is soothed. The struggle is overcome in triumph.

We respond to these stories because they whisper to us of a greater Story.

There is a power in stories. There can and should be a deep connection to the True Myth that God has been telling from the beginning. I find great comfort in the story of Eru and Melkor and the interweaving of the three themes. Knowing Tolkien's deep Christian faith, it is evident that he believed in a sovereign and all-powerful God: a God capable of taking our mistakes, our hurts, our failures, our disobedience, and our betrayals, and weaving them into His masterpiece of redemption. I find greater peace and comfort in the second story. Even though my heart and soul feel the chaos and the disorder all around, I know how this story ends. I have read and witnessed the beginning, the conflicts, the plot twists,

the passion, the emotion, and the grand finale of it all. We respond to these stories because they whisper to us of a greater Story; one where all wrongs will be made right, all sorrows will be comforted, and all tears will be wiped away. We respond to these stories because they point, they nudge, and they push us towards the True Myth where tragedy, loss, death, and hopelessness will be crushed under the heel of the One who experienced all those things in our place. The One who now sits at the right hand of His Father, waiting for the final moment of creation where He will establish His kingdom forever and happily ever after.

This is our story. What part will you play in the True Myth that God is telling?

(Images © [Ted Nasmith](#))

The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still the Book for Me? (Part 7)

"The last thing some church goers need is another Bible study. They are already know more than what they are putting into practice." [Dr. Tony Evans]

Links to the other 6 parts of this series can be found at the bottom of this article.

PART SEVEN: APPLICATION

"...[it is] what I do that defines me." (Batman)

Jesus once said, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."

Likewise, Paul the Apostle once said, "It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law who will be justified."

And James has added, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

The last step is the foundational step (Christianity: based on paradoxes that make sense)

Across the New Testament you see this emphasis on doing the Bible instead of just hearing it (or often in our case, *reading* it). And that leads me to the conclusion that we could

be absolutely correct in every way in our previous 6 essays on this topic—we could have the right 66 books, the right content in those books, very good translations in English and impeccable interpretation philosophy—and still miss the point of the Bible.

This last essay will deal with the topic of application, or putting the Bible into practice. For those who have been educated similarly to me on this you may note that I am going to try to keep this as simple as I can. I appreciate efforts by my seminary professors and many others to push people into using words like “contextualization” for this area of biblical theology, but I think we often make things like this more nuanced than they should be. And I love nuance. The above quotes from those who wrote the New Testament are not complex or deep and while this subject can be broken down, my aim today is different.

Maybe Batman doesn't have the best theology

Let me start by giving a definition of “truth” that I think will help crystallize what Jesus, Paul and James said. This definition could be argued or broken down further, but in my opinion it is a sufficient starting point: Truth is the point where our interpretation of a Bible passage intersects with how it should be applied to our lives. To say it another way, the point of each Bible passage is to figure out 1) what it meant to the original audience (our last essay focus) and 2) what it means to us today.

Or to say it even more practically, Truth is **not** “We need to have faith.” Neither is it “Noah built the ark because God commanded him to.” It’s something like “God commanded Noah to build the ark to show faith and so we should have faith to do the difficult and crazy things God leads us to do.” Granted,

there is more to the Noah story in both interpretation and application, but that is at least part of it. Without interpretation we cannot be sure the message is from God. Without application, we cannot live in obedience to God. Truth is neither merely facts nor merely action (I love the Batman quote above, but within Christianity it has a much different starting point than popular superhero culture). It is both. And both are essential to Christianity.

We know we need to read and learn the Bible. Yet if there is not genuine life change—genuine character transformation by a person in response—then true Christianity is not happening (2 Corinthians 5:17). Often at my church I will pray after a sermon that God will change our thoughts, our actions, our prayers, our reactions, our attitudes, our words or our very being. Application could be one of these things, or several or something different. But there must be some response to the Bible or else we are just like people who look in the mirror and see something on our face and then leave and forget to do anything about it. We are fools with houses on the sand.

Make Disciples “As You’re Going” Means You Have to Go

Since we discussed interpretation in depth back in Part 6, I will only focus on application today.

A extremely significant question in dealing with application of the Bible’s passages is: How can I know what was only for the original audience to practice and what is for me to practice. At the very beginning of the fascinating book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, William J. Webb gives pages of lists of nothing but commands from the Bible and asks his readers to mark with an X which ones are for us to follow today and which are not. A few examples are:

__ “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (1 Cor. 16:20)

__ “You should wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14)

__ “Heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons.” (Matthew 10:8)

__ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:5)

__ “Do not put tattoo marks on yourself.” (Leviticus 19:28)

And he lists several dozen over a few pages. But you get the point. Sometimes it may seem arbitrary why we put into practice some things literally and for all time such as “Go make disciples of all nations,” but we do not practice commands like “Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.”

You better believe I looked for a wife! Why do we follow some Bible commands and not others?

We are still learning beans...

Well, going back to my last article, context is definitely a key to knowing. We talked about different kinds of context and several of them not only matter to interpretation, but also application and we touched on that last week. But it bears repeating in clearer terms this week.

Covenant context is crucial to this. Old Covenant (Old Testament) Jews had 613 laws, some moral and some ritualistic, that God had them follow. But the New Covenant of Jesus Christ abolished the Law (John 1:17, Romans 6:14, Galatians 2:21). So I do not believe that getting a tattoo in and of itself is sinful now. Yet some laws, like at least 9 of the 10 commandments, are repeated in the New Covenant and so I do believe that adultery and coveting are still sins before God.

Old + New = Timeless (Probably)

If a command or behavior is found in both testaments it is extremely likely that we need to be practicing it today. Especially if it is repeated over and over. This is one reason

I think Christians are justified at times in crying out in disappointment with God. You find this all over the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, but also in Job and the prophets. And you see it in the New Testament with Christ and Paul when they faced death. So I think it is a legitimate biblical application to be raw and honest with God when we are in pain.

Similarly, if you can only find a command in one or two places in the Bible, it makes it more likely that it is not a timeless command. Jesus told his apostles in John 20: "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." This is about the only place you find this command in the Bible yet it used as a basis for getting a priest to forgive your sins in some Christian denominations. Other places in the Bible make it clear we go straight to God through Jesus our priest (Hebrews 4) and that we are all priests (1 Peter 2), so I would argue that this command in John 20 was only for the apostles and fixed for their time. This, in my opinion, also happens at times in Paul's writings (no matter what you believe about women speaking in church, very few people I know require women to cover their heads) and everything he writes needs to be checked against the general sweep of Scripture.

Prayer Is Not A Substitute For Action...

Immediate context will often help you know how to apply something. Common examples include Jeremiah 29:11 being about a group going into captivity and the passage that says "where two are three are gathered, there I will be" being a reference to church discipline. Common examples like this have been discussed by many so I'll give you a less recognized example. In Exodus 14:13-14, Moses says, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be

still." I cannot tell you how many times I've heard someone read those verses on KLOVE radio or put them on Facebook or Twitter. Yet in the very next verse God says, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on." Surely there are verses that teach us to be still before God (Psalm 46:10), but this is not one of them. Context in this case teaches us that there may be a time to stop praying and start moving.

Why Kiss Hello When You Can Just Say "Heeelloooooo...?"

Something else to consider with biblical application is the idea that some things are timeless commands given as principles wrapped in cultural directives. For example, the command to greet with a holy kiss. I have little doubt based on passages like Ruth 2:4 and Romans 16 and Hebrews 13:24 that greeting people well is a very biblical thing to do. I think it is a timeless command that is very under-preached in the church. Yet, not all cultures do the kiss hello thing (and some people, like Jerry Seinfeld, rebel against it). So we see a principle—greet each other with joy and blessing—given in cultural terms, kissing. For many of us, a handshake or a smile or just words of greeting will do. It's our culture. But we still apply the principle.

There are many more principles of application we could discuss but as always, I do not write to cover all ground or even most of it; I write to spur you on to more thought and more study from people who can take you further than I can. And I will close with this: I believe any given passage in the Bible must be interpreted within its fixed-for-all-time meaning that cannot change. What those passages meant 2,000 and 3,000 years ago are what they still mean. Yet application is very, very different. It changes constantly. We need to give other Christians room to apply the Bible differently and avoid these culture wars over application. Can Christians commit heresy or just make mistakes with application? Of course, and we need to check all applications against Bible context, good godly

wisdom from church people and prayerful consideration. But it is probable that people around you will have different ways of applying things like how to find God's will, what kind of music is good for worship, and a thousand other things.

When Said and Done, Let There Be Less Said Than Done

It was my intention to close with this topic so I could conclude with the thought that we could talk about the Bible all day and how reliable and it is, but if we do not let it change us, it is essentially meaningless. If you have tracked with me, you probably have spent hours reading. I've spent dozens of hours writing and editing. But the time comes, as it did with Moses and Israel in Exodus 14, to get moving.

It is my prayer that this series of articles on the Bible has been helpful to as many people as have needed it. If you have any questions about anything I've written, please feel free to contact me through the site or otherwise.

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](#).

To read Part Four on the Transmission of the NT, Go [Here](#).

To read Part Five on the Translation of the Bible, Go [Here](#).

To read Part Six on the Interpretation of the Bible, Go [Here](#).

The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still the Book for Me? (Part 6)

"We quote Jeremiah 33:3 as our life verse, but we don't know beans about the context." [Former Biblical Interpretation Professor at Welch College, Dr. Robert Woodard]

Read Part 1, An Introduction to this series [here](#).

Read Part 2 on the Old Testament Canon [here](#).

Read Part 3 on the New Testament Canon [here](#).

Read Part 4 on The Transmission of the NT [here](#).

Read Part 5 on the Translation of the Bible [here](#).

It is entirely possible to believe that we have the right 66 books, that we have the original wording for every verse of the Bible, and that we have good translations...and still miss the message of the Bible. It's possible to believe everything I've said in the previous articles and still reject the Bible as outdated and irrelevant. Because the next step in getting

from “God said” to “I hear and obey” is interpreting it. And that presents a new set of challenges and opportunities to attack the credibility of the Bible.

The Bible has often and for a long time been used to call my God racist, hateful, vindictive, supportive of slavery, a megalomaniac (a big word for ‘arrogant jerk’), against women and a whole host of other things which would be true even if the Bible’s content is historical and accurate.

You can only be arrogant if you are not God

I am very much convinced that quite often, these accusations against God and the Bible are made by people who do not understand how Biblical interpretation works and filter it through their myopic cultural lens, which is a poor way to attempt to understand anything.

Today I want to talk through reasonable methods for interpreting the Bible. We must remember at every turn that the Bible was written to cultures, languages and time periods vastly different than our own[1. Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 18]. Vastly. It amuses me when people say that parts of the Bible are “weird” to them. I can assure you that a 9th century B.C. Hebrew-speaking Jew would find 2016 America “weird” in many ways. Biblical interpretation—often represented by \$5 words like *hermeneutics* and *exegesis*[2. For a definition, see Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 42-44]—cuts through the weirdness and tries to understand Bible verses and passages the way they were written to be understood: the way their first readers understood them[2. Köstengerger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 93]. By teaching this, I think it will help even defenders of the Bible avoid mistakes in trying to understand it, and will certainly help us understand why many attacks on the Bible are leveled out of ignorance.

We don't know beans!

Sound biblical interpretation is all about context. In this essay we will look at several ways context matters. As taught by Dr. Julius Wong Loi Sing, there are three "worlds" of any Bible text:

- The world behind the text (The culture, history, time, etc. of the writings)
- The word inside the text (Immediate context of verses, grammar, word meanings, etc.)
- The world in front of the text (Application)

To give a practical example: Let's say 500 years from now someone uncovers a note written to me by wife that says, "I got a flat on Central. I walked to Armando's and they towed it for free! But I paid \$79 to them for a new one." The world behind the text looks at Chicago culture in 2016. It asks questions like: Where is Central? Who is Armando? How much money is \$79? How did people transport themselves in that time? Things like that. The world inside the text asks things like: What does 'I got a flat' mean? What does 'free' mean? What does it mean that they "towed" it? Both of these worlds have to interact to find out what that note from my wife means. To us, the meaning is simple, just as the the Bible's meaning was to its original audiences.

My professors and pastors have often called this the "historical grammatical method" for interpreting the Bible[2. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 179-180]: God worked through fixed history and culture and reduced himself to the grammar and syntax of a few now ancient languages.

In the example above with my wife there is no need for application because the message was only for me. But the Bible's message is for everyone so we will deal with application in our next and final essay. For now we deal with

the first two:

First World Problems

Let's look at the first world: the world behind the text.

Historical and Cultural Context

People accuse the Bible of being pro slavery. But knowing more about Ancient Near East cultures that surrounded Israel in the centuries before Christ and during his time can help us grasp why that is not the case[7. Paul Copan, *Is God A Moral Monster*, 135].

Even though there are laws governing slavery in the Old Testament and even though no New Testament writer goes out of his way to lambast slavery and evil, we must understand that the Bible 1) does not generally speak to slavery as we think of it from American history in the centuries leading up to our Civil War and 2) does not endorse or promote slavery as good or even ideal.

In comparison to the pagan culture around them, the OT laws on slavery show mercy and more humanizing behavior towards slaves, and gave rights to slaves that were unheard of for that time[8. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 124] . There were ways to gain freedom, laws against mistreatment and in Deuteronomy 15 we can see God's desire that in an ideal situation there are no poor and no slaves[9. Copan, 127-131] (which I will add, was exactly how the Garden of Eden was and would supposedly have remained without sin). The situation at times was still very rough even for slaves in Israel but we can see God moving his people toward an ideal a little bit at a time, which we will discuss more below.

In the New Testament we can see the the idea of slavery is

much less harsh and the New Testament authors move the view of slavery ethic even more towards the ideal of no slaves.

Slavery in the NT cultural context was often not as repugnant as we think of today; History teacher and REO contributor Dave Lytle says historians estimate about 1/3 of people who lived in Rome were slaves and some were highly educated and chose to sell themselves into it to climb the social step ladder.

Beyond this, the NT makes it clear that slaves and free people are equal in the kingdom (Galatians 3:28) and Paul's letter to Philemon is an evidence that the NT was moving toward the ultimate ethic of no indentured servitude[10. Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament metaphor for total devotion to Christ*, 57-61]. He says to not treat Onesimus as a slave but as a brother.

So why didn't God use the Bible to abolish slavery? N.T. Wright compares it to modern cars destroying the ozone—Bible preachers don't preach against that these days because cars are a part of how life functions, even if they do cause great harm[4. Taken from a Q&A found at www.youtube.com/Does_the_Bible_Support_Slavery?]. Slavery was similar; it was a part of the fabric of life for those cultures and abolishing it quickly would have been imprudent[5. Murray, 61]. Yet we can also see from above how God was moving corrupt cultures (including his own people Israel) away from it little by little. When a situation is as awful as you find in cultures of the Bible, you cannot change things overnight. It is similar to trying to go into a war torn, dictator governed country and starting a democratic republic (or whatever you consider to be the ultimate ethic for government). It will not be done very quickly[11. William Webb, *Slaves Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, 30-66].

Jesus in Matthew 19 speaks to this when he says that God permitted divorce in the OT because people's hearts were hard[13. Ibid, 42-44]. God permits things that he hates at

times because people's sin takes them so far from his ideal. (Please know that I believe there are justifiable biblical reasons for divorce that Jesus and Paul taught as well.)

Total Bible Context

Often times the Bible will explain things in other parts that help us understand hard passages better. The killing of the Canaanite people in Joshua is often used to demean the God of the Bible as bloodthirsty and a murderer. But if you read God's words in Genesis and Deuteronomy, you can see that Canaan was a wicked country that engaged in some of the most vile and depraved acts a people group can. And that God waited centuries before finally judging them, showing mercy and patience. When people point out that God commanded that Israel kill the "women and children" it is important to understand that the women may or may not have been as wicked as the men (in Genesis God could not find even 5 total people that were righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah).

And as far as the children go, it is at least possible that God was sparing them from growing up in a circumstance that almost certainly would have led to their lives begin far away from God, as their ancestors were. Yet, no matter what conjecture we can come up with about why God did or didn't do anything in the Bible, we can always follow up with more questions and more doubt. And at some point we have to ask ourselves, "If God did everything the way I think he should, wouldn't that make me God?" At some point faith that God sees and knows all has to be a part of what we cannot see when interpreting the Bible. We also must acknowledge that if God is the author of life, he has the right to give it and take it. This is why it is not hypocritical for commanding not to murder and yet causing the the death of people.

Total Bible context can be seen as a way to fully understand some passages in the Bible that seem degrading to women. Without trying to make Paul say things he doesn't say in

certain passages about women being silent in church, we should also note that there are other passages in the Bible where women are prophetesses (Exodus 15:20, Luke 2:36), leaders in the church (Acts 18) and leaders in Israel's history (Judges 4, 2 Kings 22). Whatever we believe about Paul's words in his letters, we cannot rip them from the context of the whole Bible.

Another example: if we are to understand Psalms 32 and 51, we must first read 2 Samuel 11-12 because when David wrote those two psalms, the events of 2 Samuel had just happened. The Bible is meant to be read as a whole, not parts here and there removed from their greater context of God's complete story to mankind.

Covenant Context

By this I mean that there are two Covenants (a better word than "Testament" as I explained in Essay #2 in this series) in the Bible and sometimes we must know the difference between the two if we are to understand the Bible's commands on certain topics.

The New Testament church, our present Christian church, is no longer under the Levitical law as found in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. There are, however, laws that were repeated in the New Testament for believers to continue to follow. So there is no contradiction in a Christian believing that some things in the law are still applicable (like I believe stealing is wrong because Paul says it is in Ephesians 4) and some things that are not applicable to today, like not believing that we must not wear clothes made of two different fabrics. I'd say even the oddest of the Levitical laws had a principle behind them that made sense to the original audience. For example, it may be that God told his people under the old covenant not to wear mixed fabrics as an object lesson for them not to mix with other pagan nations' religions.

Regardless, reading through both testaments will help you know which Laws from Leviticus are for all time and which were temporary until Christ came.

Knock the Door Down and Go On In

The Second World: The Word Inside The Text

Beyond the bigger picture of the world (literally at times) behind the text, we now look at the world inside the text and the more immediate contexts we need to understand when understanding a passage or verse in the Bible.

Immediate Verse Context

Most people who read the Bible carefully can see that when Paul wrote Phillipians 4:13, he didn't mean unilaterally that he could do anything but rather that he could find contentment in all circumstances. At least that is the primary application. You get that from immediate context in Phillipians 4.

Also, if you look at context by disregarding chapter and verse divisions, which were added hundreds of years after the Bible was written and canonized, it helps understand things better.

In 1 Peter 3:1-7, wives are told to submit to their husbands. Yet if you read 1 Peter 3 right after 1 Peter 2, you can see that Peter is telling wives to do what Jesus did. Jesus was equal to God and yet submitted to him (meaning submission does not have to equal inequality) and endured unfair treatment.

By giving wives the example to follow of Jesus, Peter's Lord and God, he is doing the opposite of demeaning them.

Book Context

1 Corinthians 13 is used in weddings and for very good reason: the biblical definition of love should work in the most intimate of relationships. But it is notable that 1

Corinthians was written to a church and not a marriage so we need to be practicing this kind of love in church as well—especially to those who wrong us and hurt us.

Ecclesiastes is another example, discussed briefly in Part Two of this series. You cannot take everything you read at face value in that book because the author was at the end of his disobedient life and depressed. The book in general is written with a different perspective than most of the Bible.

Genre Context

You cannot read a Psalm, which was probably written with a lot of emotion, the same way you read one of Paul's letters. They are different types of writings. Some types of writings, like parables, are figurative. Others are literal. When Jesus said "Preach the gospel to everybody" we do that literally.

When he said to "pluck your eye out," that is not literal. Those are obvious examples, yet people often treat every book of the Bible as though they were the same genre.

Similarly, when you read narrative, it is important to note that often the Bible is telling us what happened, not what God wants to happen. It tells us what is, not what ought to be.

No one would use King David's sin with Bathsheba to accuse God of wanting adultery to happen. Yet we often justify actions by saying "So and so in the Bible did it". You need more than human behavior in narrative to prove something is what God wants you to do.

The Gospels are narrative: four accounts of Jesus's life, teachings, death and resurrection. Yet they all differ on details, especially about the resurrection. One Gospel says the tomb was already rolled away, another says it was not.

One says there were two angels, another says there was one. The reason is that even though they are stories, they are not court documents. The evangelists who wrote the Gospels were not concerned with details and trying to find contradictions

in their stories is often a fruitless endeavor. Just because they have different details does not mean any or all of them are lying or that what they said happened didn't happen. When witnesses have the same exact details of events it often means they have colluded to make up a story. Real witnesses of real events will often differ in minor details.

Having said that, we must admit there are, on the surface, contradictions in the Gospels that are harder to explain.

Most notably it seems that John says that The Last Supper happened on Wednesday night while the other Gospels are clear that it was Thursday night. That one is not so easily explained and I recommend I. Howard Marshall's *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* for speculation on why that is and possible reconciling of the passages.

There are several other random things about Biblical interpretation I have been taught over the years. Like, that the Greek words for love "agape" and "philo" are often synonyms and that "agape" isn't always some special kind of special love from God[13. D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 28-32]. Or that when Jesus quotes from Psalm 22:1 on the cross saying, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" it is likely that his hearers would have understood the first part of the psalm being a reference to the whole Psalm and that Christ was also saying he knew God would save him from his suffering, as Psalm 22 teaches.

I say these things to close with the idea that the Bible is deep and not to be studied at a surface level. I do not say this to discourage you. I say to encourage you to get involved in a Bible believing church, read as much of it as you can, get a study Bible, go to Bible studies, check the books I've cited throughout this series of essays (found at the bottom of each essay), do whatever you can to learn more.

Learn more about context, Bible history, culture and all the

rest I've written about here.

God not only holds us accountable to what we know but how much we try to know. In the US we have so many resources to learn about the Bible. Utilize them. The more you know God, the more he is glorified. And that should be our end goal.

Read Part Seven [Here](#).

The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, is it Still the Book for Me?

(Part 5)

The first thing that happened in the history of the church was translation (Acts 2:1-11)...translating the New Testament is, in fact, something each generation ought to be doing. [1. Taken from the Preface to *A Kingdom New Testament*] [N.T. Wright]

We discussed why this series of essays is important in light of modern scholarly attacks on the Bible [here](#).

We discussed why it is reasonable to conclude the Protestant Old Testament has the right 39 books [here](#).

We discussed why we can be confident our 27 New Testament books are the ones God wants us to have [here](#).

We discussed how we can be confident that the content of our NT books is correct in spite of delays in writing them, gaps in time in manuscripts and mistakes in manuscripts [here](#).

Christian Unity Lost In Translation

Since the Bible was not written in English, or any modern language, this step to producing a Bible is extremely important.

This article will be different than the other six in one key way: the other six have issues more commonly attacked by opponents of the Bible while the issue of translation has caused fights and quarrels between Christians themselves. There are enough arguments out there about translation of the Bible to make your head spin and anyone with a Christian background like mine is not unfamiliar with the king of all Christian debates (at least in recent history): the debate over the King James Version of the Bible. I don't aim to make

your head spin. I aim more to explain as much as I can with facts, although my opinion on some issues will be impossible to withhold. I really do not mind debating either, but know the point of this series is to defend the Bible, not create conflict within Christianity.

Received Text, Critical Text, What's the Difference?

Since almost all Bibles use the same source (the Masoretic Text)[2. And even then the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls 70 years ago has affected some modern translation, as in Isaiah 53:11 in the NIV] for the Old Testament, I will speak to the differences in modern translations in what manuscripts they use for the New Testament. That is where the bulk of the translation conflicts lie.

As mentioned in our last essay, there are about 5,800 Greek manuscripts we have with which to work. But that does not mean every translation uses the same exact manuscripts as a starting point. Most famously, the KJV uses a handful of manuscripts to translate the New Testament that became known as the Received Text, often referred to by its Latin name, the *Textus Receptus*. [3. Paul D. Wegner, *Journey from Texts to Translation*, 337] This is what my favorite historical Christian, Erasmus (which I will name my first son if I can wear my wife down), had to work with in the early 16th century in compiling a New Testament [4. Ibid.].

Taking advantage of more and earlier and (to many scholars) better manuscripts, modern translations use a more eclectic collection from which to translate the Greek of the New Testament into English. Many modern translations work off 27th revision of the Nestle-Aland Greek text. But at least two translations which my wife and I use regularly—the NET Bible and the Holman Christian Standard Bible—use a different yet still eclectic group of manuscripts as a base [5. Stanley

Porter, *How We Got the New Testament*, 171].

Authorized But Not Eternally So

I will spare you a lengthy and bloody history (and present) of the debate as to which translation has the best manuscripts from which to work. But since the KJV has been the premiere Bible for Bible translations, I will discuss issues relating to it. Even though the KJV has less manuscripts, the argument for the Textus Receptus (TR) is—to say it simply and in part—that it contains manuscripts of better quality and more orthodox than the ones used by modern translations. The belief is that the TR text family represents the best of the what we have and does not take out words like “Christ” in Romans 16:20 (the accusation being heretics removed it when copying) or the direct mention of the Trinity in 1 John 5:7—essentially the only place where we can find an explicit mention of it in the Bible.[6. Wegner, 338]

Personally, I have no real issue if someone wants to say that the KJV base (the TR) is better than modern eclectic Greek Texts. Nearly everyone who has taught me Greek and Biblical Interpretation disagrees, but I do not care that people believe such. It is something intelligent believers support and I will not disparage them.

You’ll Have To Try Harder Than That to Remove The Trinity From My Bible!

But to take to the level of KJV only-ism is too far. Nearly all genuine scholars from all over the world respect the manuscripts that non-KJV Bibles use. And manuscript issues aside, you get the exact same doctrine from the NIV, or NASB, or ESV, or NLT, as you do from the KJV. Every modern translation that I use teaches that:

- Jesus is God

- The Holy Spirit is God
- There is only one God
- Jesus was sinless
- Jesus died as our substitute for sin
- Jesus rose from the dead to defeat death

...and literally hundreds of other things I believe with all my heart soul, mind and strength. I do not need the KJV's rendering of 1 John 5:7 to believe in the Trinity. I have John 8:58, 2 Corinthians 3:16 and Deuteronomy 6:4 (and dozens of other verses) to teach it to me, in any translation I use.

Before I leave this sub-point, I will add that I strongly encourage you to read more about this since as a blog-type essay it only scratches the surface of the issues. And I do not say this only in the sense that you educate yourself on manuscripts and translations. Read biographical information on William Tyndale. Read about Erasmus. I assure you, my desire to name a child such an odd name is not simply founded in Erasmus' translation of the New Testament (or how weird my name is). Church history matters a great deal. Educate yourself.

Translation Theory: You mean we fight about this as well?

A few years ago, Dr. Matthew McAfee, a professor of Bible and Greek at Welch College (my alma mater) told me and the other pastors of my church that the KJV is often hard to read not simply because it has older English but also because they tried quite hard to translate things as literally and as word for word as possible.

Thanks to Eugene Nida in the middle of the 20th century, some modern translations decided to do more "thought-for-thought" translation[7. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 13]. The premise of this is simple: It serves people better to hear or read a translation that sounds more like the language it is

written in than the one it is translated from. It is a different approach than “word-for-word” in that it is less literal (and in many cases less “wooden”) and more easily readable.

Me, A Name, I Call Myself...

I’ll give you an example using Spanish. Keep in mind this is very simplistic and much translation is way more complex than this, but my goal to get your appetite for this going and not to parse a bunch of Greek.

Spanish says: “Me llamo Gowdy.”

Now, if you asked me to translate that into English, I’d say without any hesitation, “My name is Gowdy.” But those who know Spanish or are very clever can probably point out that a more literal translation would be “I call myself Gowdy.” Or, at its most literal, “Me I call Gowdy.” In theory, a word for word translation would say “I call myself...” and a thought for thought would say, “My name is...”

Another more complex example: there are times when a Spanish speaker from some countries will ask “Que tienes?” and mean “What’s the matter?” or “What’s wrong with you?” even though literally that means, “What do you have?” A literal translation would go with the latter in theory while a ‘thought-for-thought’ may use one of the two prior translations that sound better in English. The problem is that saying “Que tienes?” and translating it “What’s the matter?” assumes you know that is what the speaker means when perhaps they actually do mean “What do you have?” There are more risks, to be sure, in thought-for-thought translation. But this philosophy of translation says that the reward of a reader hearing things more naturally in their first language is worth it.

Literally The Correct Use of ‘Literally’

You can see from this example the advantages and disadvantages to each take on translation. If you are too literal, things are nonsensical and at times you cannot understand them at all (and there are interlinear Bibles out there that show you how hard the Bible is to read if translated literally— including word order—into English from the original languages). Even if you are reasonably literal it still may hurt the reader's ability to appreciate the message and ideally would require notes of explanation for things like idioms. Yet not literal enough stands more a chance of not accurately representing the first language. This, in essence, is the debate and it has been going on for decades.

I am not a Greek expert by any means, so I shan't pontificate on that. But I do teach English as a second language and have studied Spanish for 10 years, Polish for five and did take Greek in seminary. I say that to say that I have thought about translation a lot and have had to translate many many times in my life. And **my preference** leans towards thought-for-thought. I much prefer a Bible translation that says "a day's wage" instead of "a denarius"[9. Although you will notice that some translations like the NLT will give the modern meaning and then in a note at the bottom also give the literal meaning saying *Greek, denarius*. That is the ideal.]. When I translate the sermons at my church for Spanish speakers, if the pastor says something is a "piece of cake" for an easy task I will always say that it's "pan comida" (eaten bread) because that is the equivalent in many Spanish speaking countries.

Of course the Bible is different than a sermon. And that is partly why this is such a big deal. But to me I think the idea of word-for-word being "better" is unfortunate thinking and has infiltrated the American church, with people exalting the ESV and NASB—two very literal translations—as superior to others. But as many people in Christianity have concluded, I think the "best" translation depends on your goal. I do love the NASB if I want to study deeply. But if I want to read a

huge chunk of a book of the Bible in one sitting I will get out the NLT, which is far less literal and hence, easier to read. (As evidence, I once read through the NASB in 45 minutes a day in finished in 10.5 months. I did the same with the NLT and it took me four months).

Bible reading is not one-dimensional. There could be any number of goals you have when reading the Bible. That affects which translation is probably more helpful.

Some Men (or is it “People”?) Argue Over Gender Neutrality

Some who are familiar with this theme may note that I have not mentioned up to this point the debate over gender neutral language in the Bible. This covers issues like when the Hebrew or Greek says “the men” when referring to both “men and women.” The question here is whether we translate it as “the men” or as “the people” (or even “the men and women”). This has caused a riff in Christianity, especially with the TNIV earlier this century and, more recently, the 2011 NIV. The heart of the debate is whether we should try to be more friendly in translation to gender issues vs. should we bow to social and cultural pressure and even possibly hurt the translation of some verses. I have had friends and professors on both sides of this.

I will not say much on this except to cite a couple of blogs that deal with it—one on each side—and let you decide for yourself:

[Emasculating Scripture for Political Correctness](#)

[Gender Neutrality and Bible Translation](#)

Translation Is Far From Boring!

Translation can be a fascinating exercise. Watching it happen every week with English and Spanish at my church has been one

of the most enthralling events of my life.

So as my last sub-point I want to give an example of how translation can be interesting if you really study it and how I encourage you to learn more if you are able.

Let's look at the wording of Mary and Joseph's relationship in Matthew 1. The commitment level they had when Mary discovered she was pregnant with Jesus is not something that translates into 21st century American English very easily. They were not married, yet our modern American custom of "engaged" is too soft a word to explain it since breaking off their commitment was serious enough for a divorce. Look at a few options provided by major English translations:

Word for Word Translations:

KJV: Mary was **espoused** to Joseph...

NASB: Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph...[adds note explaining "betrothed"]

ESV: Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph...[adds note explaining "betrothed"]

Thought-for-Thought Translations:

NIV: Mary was **pledged to be married** to Joseph...

NLT: Mary was **engaged to be married** to Joseph...

HCSB: Mary had been **engaged** to Joseph...

Here again, we can see the strengths and weaknesses of both strategies, only this time in the Bible instead of from Spanish. Literal gives us more accurate words, yet words like "espoused" and "betrothed" have little to no meaning for most English speaking readers in the US in 2016. Yet the thought-for-thought versions do not capture the meaning of Joseph and Mary's pre-marriage relationship. Which is best? I'm not

sure and in either case you need a note explaining it better than a translation can give you. Of the above, the note in the NASB defining “betrothed” (“The first stage of marriage in Jewish culture, usually lasting for a year before the wedding night, more legal than an engagement”) is the best explanation in my opinion.

Final Advice

In closing, I want to offer some advice on Bible reading in regards to translation. Take them as advice and not as absolute truths:

1. Agreeing with Wright[10. Wright, *KNT*, preface], I say that if possible, get out two English translations at a time when reading. You may have seen those big Bibles with four translations all together. I love mine.
2. If reading two translations at a time bothers you, read through different versions, either by changing regularly or by changing versions after you finish one.
3. If possible, get a study Bible with notes to help explain things like betrothal/engagement.
4. If you know a second language, read your Bible in both.

I say all of these things because no one translation of the Bible can truly capture the Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic of the Bible. Multiple translations and languages help bring out fuller meanings. The Bible is not meant to be merely read, but studied.

But more than anything, do something to get the Bible into your daily life. We are so blessed to have so many good translations in English. Much of the world does not have this. Do not take it for granted.

Read Part Six [Here](#).

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](#).

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 Psuedepigrapha 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 Deuterocanoncial 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](#).

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](#).