

## **The Trustworthiness of Scripture**

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### **Introduction**

In witnessing today, we find far more people rejecting the Bible's claim to be God's word than was the case in former years. As a result, our witness is often rendered ineffective from the very start, for many people are unwilling to believe the Bible, the source of authority by which we proclaim God's message of human sinfulness and his offer of reconciliation through Christ.

This situation today reflects a spreading attitude of unbelief which can perhaps be traced from the fall of Puritanism in seventeenth century England through the Enlightenment and French Revolution of the eighteenth century to the Rationalism of nineteenth century Germany and finally into American colleges and churches in our own [20<sup>th</sup>] century.

This particular stream of unbelief has been coupled with a high level of scholarship rediscovered by the Renaissance humanists and developed by Bible believers of the Reformation and Puritan periods. This combination of scholarship and unbelief has raised an impressive edifice in opposition to Biblical Christianity.

The most famous construction of this movement is the biological theory of evolution, which denies the Biblical teaching that God created all things, including man, and that man, by his own volition, rebelled against God and fell from his original sinless state.

Less famous, but equally devastating, have been various psychological theories based on evolution, by which man, rising from a primitive animal state, is gradually improving his own religions, moral codes and actual behavior. In such psychologies, sin loses its absolute quality of transgression against God and becomes merely guilt feelings or antisocial behavior, to be removed by proper conditioning.

Even less familiar in Christian circles, but most destructive of all, have been the direct attacks made on the trustworthiness of the Bible by this formidable combination of learning with unbelief.

As a result of such scholarship, the whole Biblical picture of the God who made all things and who intervenes miraculously in history has been denied. The great prophet Moses is pictured as a legend and his five books of revelation from God are seen as a cleverly-contrived patchwork produced by editors working as much as a thousand years later. Virtually every prophetic book of the Old Testament has been divided up into contributions from several authors in order to fit an evolutionary view for the development of religion and to avoid bonafide supernatural prediction of future events.

The New Testament has not been overlooked in this radical reworking of the Bible. Jesus has been variously pictured as a gentle humanitarian teacher, a radical revolutionary bent

on overthrowing the Roman establishment, a clever plotter seeking to fulfill Old Testament predictions of the Messiah, or a deluded fanatic who had convinced himself that God had sent him.

To obtain such pictures of Jesus, the Gospels are viewed as unreliable products of superstitious and biased writers far removed from the actual events. The testimony of Paul is usually discredited by removing him as far as possible, both geographically and theologically, from the original disciples of Jesus, and by postulating a strong antagonism between them.

Like the Christian view, this complex of theories also requires the Bible to be a work truly unprecedented in world history, but now its distinction is seen to lie in its mass of cleverly-contrived devices to cover up forgery, to falsify prophecies and still to teach a morality of love and honesty!

If this situation is appalling to us as evangelical Christians living in the latter part of the twentieth century, at least we should be comforted by the fact that this is what we should have expected. The Bible pictures unbelievers as “deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:13), “suppressing the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18), “having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim 3:5), and “wresting the Scriptures to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:16).

Nor should we think of today’s opposition to the Word of God as historically unprecedented, for “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). Six hundred years before Christ, King Jehoiakim cut up and burned the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah. The Jewish leaders had Jesus put to death, and they forcibly sought to stop his disciples from proclaiming his resurrection.

Later the Roman government actively persecuted Christians off and on for over 250 years, confiscating and destroying Bibles in the process. Before AD 300, some of the arguments against the prophecies of Daniel now found in college textbooks were put forward by the pagan writer Porphyry. Even after Christianity was legalized by Constantine, the Roman emperor Julian sought to defy biblical prophecy by having the Jerusalem temple rebuilt. His spectacular failure is an interesting story.

These attacks on the Bible have ever been used by unbelievers to excuse immorality, even as they are today. Jonathan Swift, in the early eighteenth century, reports on the relief of a man at hearing some manuscripts of the New Testament read differently in a passage on the Trinity, who therefore concluded he could safely defy the parson and continue in his sins.

It is clear, I think, that the matter of the trustworthiness of Scripture is central to any consideration of Christian witness today, not to mention its crucial importance for the very existence of Christianity. It is this vital subject which we would like to consider this evening.

## Trustworthiness a Revealed Doctrine

The first thing about the trustworthiness of Scripture that we as Christians need to understand is this. The inerrancy of the Bible is a *revealed* doctrine of Scripture and not a conclusion reached by an examination of evidence other than the Scripture's own statements. It is true, as we shall see later, that there is compelling evidence that the liberal view is incorrect which sees this universe as a closed system of cause and effect into which not even God can break, but the point we wish to make here is that man is incapable of proving the trustworthiness of the Bible in the sense of its being an *inerrant* revelation from God.

This is so, in the first place, because no man knows enough by investigation to make a universal negative statement, whether it be "There is no god" or "There are no errors in the Bible." All of us have finite brains and short lifetimes. As a result, we cannot examine all possible interpretations of every Scripture passage to show that all agree with reality. This is further complicated by the fact that we don't know much about reality either.

On the other hand, the unbeliever would seem to be in a relatively easier position, for he needs only to demonstrate *one* mistake in Scripture to disprove its inerrancy. And in fact, unbelievers have alleged a great many errors in Scripture. As it happens, however, these errors have had a disconcerting tendency to disappear when further evidence is uncovered. For instance, the book of Daniel was for a long time attacked as inaccurate because it listed the last king of Babylon as Belshazzar and said he was killed in the fall of Babylon. But all other historians known said that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon and he was spared when the Persians conquered the Empire. But then the archives of Babylon were discovered buried in the sand on clay tablets. These show that Nabonidus was not interested in ruling the Babylonian Empire, so he went into the desert to study the stars and left his son Belshazzar as co-regent to rule in his place.

Where such alleged errors have later been cleared up, the allegation is usually seen to be due to misinterpretation of Scripture, to excessive reliance on inaccurate historical materials, or most often, to arguments based on silence rather than positive evidence.

Man cannot himself prove the inerrancy of Scripture in the second place because his intellect has been damaged by sin. This defect, it should be noted, afflicts believers as well as unbelievers, and it will leave us with many mistaken ideas which will not be cleared up until we are glorified. Naturally, our correct and mistaken ideas about what the Bible teaches will not necessarily fit together without contradiction.

In the third place, God is infinite and so in many ways forever beyond our finite understanding. For instance, we may never know how God exists in three persons and is yet a unity, nor how God's control over all things and events can be reconciled with our responsibility for our own actions.

But though we cannot prove by independent investigation that the Bible is inerrant, it is not difficult to show that this is what the Scripture reveals concerning itself. Thus 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that all Scripture is “God-breathed,” that it is spoken from the mouth of God himself. 2 Peter 1:20-21 indicates that God did not leave the prophets to interpret historical events and visions by their own private ability, but rather that the Spirit of God carried them along to the right result.

The product of their prophesying, according to Deuteronomy 18:21-22, was so accurate that false prophets could be recognized by one mistake in their predictions, and so clear that the common people could be entrusted with recognizing the false prophets and executing the death penalty upon them. As a result, the Scriptural commandments are so authoritative that Jesus warned anyone who teaches that even the least commandment could be safely broken would be *least* in God’s kingdom!

Thus we as Christians are called upon to defend the trustworthiness of Scripture against attacks from outside (or even inside) the church, just as we must earnestly contend for the deity of Christ and his bodily resurrection. It is a fact of revelation proved from Scripture itself, not from an appeal to archeology, science or reason.

### **Trustworthiness a Living Principle**

Because Christ has called us to be his witnesses, because our good works are to glorify our Father in heaven, the trustworthiness of Scripture must be more to us than an abstract doctrine. It must also be a principle which controls our whole life.

In the first place, it is the trustworthiness of Scripture as a principle of our life which has, in a real sense, saved us. Of course it is true that we have been saved by God’s having chosen us, by Christ’s atoning death for us, and by the Holy Spirit’s saving work in giving us the new birth. It is also true that most of us were taught the truths of the Gospel by some other person, rather than learning them for ourselves in individual Bible study, but it is still true that the Bible has saved us. The Scripture says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:7), and church history has amply demonstrated that it is only in the Bible that God’s word has been preserved through the centuries.

Thus Paul tells Timothy to continue in the things he has learned from childhood in the “Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation” (2 Tim 3:15). The Psalmist agrees: “Unless the law had been my delights, I should then have perished in my affliction” (Ps 119:92).

Secondly, once we have been saved, it is necessary for us to trust the Scriptures in order to live the Christian life. “All Scripture is profitable for teaching, for conviction (of sin), for correcting faults and for discipline in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

So many aspects of the Christian life involve things we cannot see and things we cannot know outside of Scripture, that we shall surely make shipwreck of our faith without it. The whole eleventh chapter of Hebrews illustrates the crucial decisions made by men of faith in which correct knowledge of the invisible or the future was absolutely essential. The only armor which will protect us against the invisible activities of Satan comes to us through Scripture.

The Psalmist recognized the value of Scripture in his daily life when he saw himself in relation to those who didn't have it (Ps 119:98-100):

*Thou through thy commandments hast made me  
wiser than my enemies...  
I have more understanding than all my teachers:  
for thy testimonies are my meditation.  
I understand more than the ancients  
because I keep thy precepts.*

Spiritually we are like men walking along a dangerous path in the darkness, but the Scripture is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path (Ps 119:105).

So our attitude toward Scripture distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever. The Christian does not guide his steps through life according to the advice of the wicked, nor choose the lifestyle of habitual sinners, nor take the viewpoint of mockers (Psalm 1). Instead he actually enjoys God's laws, and this attitude and the resultant Bible study produce a happy, fruitful life.

### **Trustworthiness a Powerful Weapon**

At this point, it may seem that I have said rather little about witness. I have suggested that the trustworthiness of Scripture is a revealed doctrine which is a vital necessity of the Christian life, but what does this have to do with winning the lost? Actually, it is very important to our Christian witness, but to make this clear we must go onward.

By now, some might conclude that our doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture independent of external evidence is an impregnable fortress, and that we as Christians may go inside, lock the door and kick down any ladders by which outsiders may seek to enter this safe position, trusting that the Lord will somehow populate the fortress independent of visible means, perhaps by using a Star Trek transporter. But this is absurd.

Although the mysterious and supernatural work of the Holy Spirit is indispensable for the salvation of everyone who becomes a Christian, God has chosen to work through means to accomplish this purpose. He has chosen "the weak things ... to confound the mighty" (1 Cor 1:27). The treasure of God's free salvation is carried to others in the earthen pots which are saved sinners (2 Cor 4:7).

That Christians may accomplish this purpose, God has given us his trustworthy, miraculous Word as a powerful weapon by which we may wage offensive warfare, “piercing to soul and spirit” (Heb 4:12), “casting down strongholds” (2 Cor 10:4), that the “gates of hell may not prevail” (Matt 16:18) against us. But this Word is not some sort of magic talisman for driving out demons by a few choice incantations, nor a shield for stopping enemy bullets, nor furniture for our bookcase, nor even a sourcebook of passages to memorize without understanding. It is only as the Bible is understood by patient, sane and pious labor that it manifests its supernatural force in transforming lives.

It is then that we come to see men for what they are, the highest earthly creations of God, made in his own image, yet fallen into such depths of sin that even we as Christians (but for the grace of God) are capable of every degradation and atrocity that men have ever committed. This Biblical picture, properly understood by Christians and properly communicated to the unsaved, has a powerful convicting force in bringing men to recognize the truth of Scripture and their awful predicament before a righteous God. It is here that God has given us a real weapon to puncture man’s inflated self-image.

In science, too, the Bible provides powerful insights to challenge the theories of unsaved humanity. Alone among the documents of antiquity, the Bible depicts the universe as an enormous (Jer 31:37; 33:22) but finite (1 Kings 8:27; Ps 147:4) object of finite age which was created (Gen 1:1) by a Being whose nature alone can account for order and personality. How is it that the insignificant Israelite nation came to possess such a conception, which fits the observable data to a degree unmatched even by modern theories?

On a smaller scale, how did the biblical writers avoid the common scientific mistakes of their time? Why does the Bible teach a round earth (Job 26:10) instead of a flat one? How did its authors understand the world to hang on nothing (Job 26:7) when nearly everyone else knew such an object must have material support or it would fall? How has the Bible avoided the medical and genetic errors of antiquity? (see McMillen, *None of These Diseases*). Such examples are barbs God has prepared for the balloon of religious evolution, but we must understand and use them if it is to be punctured in our generation.

But sometimes these arguments will be swept under the rug by unbelievers who postulate the existence of (unknown) advanced civilizations in antiquity or even visitors from other planets, who gave all this information to the Hebrews. While today such suggestions are on the lunatic fringe, it is characteristic of the unbeliever to run to another (false) position if you demolish his previous one. We cannot expect all opposition to vanish if we succeed in showing its weakness. (Remember that they crucified Jesus.) Our job is to give a logical reason for the hope within us, to stop the mouths of gainsayers, and let God take care of the results.

Another weapon of great importance which the Bible provides for our witness is fulfilled prophecy. The Bible’s description of reality explains Jeane Dixon’s unusual, probably supernatural, but certainly fallible, prophecies. Can materialism or positivism explain how the Bible was right in predicting a second exile of the Jewish people (Is 11:11), yet

their preservation (now lasting nearly two thousand years) as a distinct, recognizable group, an event unprecedented in world history? Can a non-supernaturalist explain how the Bible predicts that a particular gate in a particular city would be “permanently” closed (Ezek 44:1-2), though the prediction was fulfilled two thousand years later by a member of an antagonistic religion?

And biblical prophecy is more than merely isolated prodigies. Centuries before the Christian era, the prophets of the Old Testament predicted the coming of a man especially commissioned by God, who had already existed from ancient times. This man was nevertheless to be born in the small village of Bethlehem in Judea (Micah 5:2), yet he would someday become world-famous. He was to come while the second Jewish temple was still standing (Hag 2:7-9; Mal 3:1), while the Jews were still in their own land as a nation, during the 69<sup>th</sup> sabbatical cycle after the command to rebuild Jerusalem (Dan 9:25-26). Although this man would work miracles and offer salvation to his people, yet he would be rejected by them (Isaiah 53). He was to be put to death by means of executions involving pierced hands and feet, stretching of the body, terrible thirst, mocking and degradation, yet he was to live again and his message was to be spread everywhere by his followers (Psalm 22).

With so many specific restrictions described prophetically, it would be amazing if anyone in history would be able to fit them, even if the miraculous features are left out. But Jesus of Nazareth not only fit them, he is generally recognized even by unbelievers to be one of the most significant figures in world history, and that for reasons which have nothing to do with fulfillment of prophecy.

Thus biblical prophecy is not only a weapon to puncture the theories of unbelievers, it also leads them and us to the feet of the God-man Jesus Christ, whose life, death and resurrection provide the only way of reconciliation to God.

## **Conclusions**

Let us summarize what we have said this evening. The Bible is God’s word and therefore it is trustworthy. Because it is trustworthy, its prescriptions really do work to bring men to Christ and to guide those who follow him.

But most of the unsaved will never take the time to read the Bible unless they are drawn to it. They will not be drawn to it unless they see in us some quality of life that cannot be found outside of Christianity.

Our witness, then, will be no better than our Christian life. Our Christian life will not rise above our trust in God’s word. But, by God’s grace, our trust in his word can grow as we understand it and apply it seriously in our own lives.

Let us then earnestly study his word for what it is, a life-giving communication from the One who made every atom, every human, every galaxy. Let us live his word in the

realization that the Creator is a holy God who sees us every moment, who will one day bring our every thought and act into judgment.

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