

CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

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SCRIPTURE: 2 Tim 2:14-15 and 3:10-17

TEXT: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

INTRODUCTION

Two events in the last few months have raised new questions in the minds of many regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible. I hope that they haven't shaken your faith. But, for many who may not be grounded in the faith, they have served to undermine their confidence in Scripture. It all provides a good opportunity for us to review the reasons behind our trust in what the Bible says and renew our commitment to and appreciation of God's wonderful gift to us in the Bible.

The **first** event was the release of the movie, The Da Vinci Code, based on the book by Dan Brown. The book has been on bestseller lists for a couple of years, read by roughly 45 million Americans— that's one in every five adults. While it is fiction, it claims the dates, documents, historical figures, etc. within it are true. But Dan Brown freely intertwines myth with history to make for an exciting novel. In it, Brown gives us a Jesus who neither died on the cross nor rose from the dead. He claims Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and they had children who intermarried with the French royal line. Brown backs up these astonishing claims by reference to two apocryphal gospels, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip. Brown asserts that this has been known for centuries, but the truth has been kept from the public for fear of destroying the power of the church, guarded by groups like the Knights Templar.

The **second** event was just before Easter when the National Geographic Society released the "discovery" of a new gospel, the Gospel of Judas. This sole known copy was hidden in the Egyptian desert for nearly 1700 years until discovered by looters. In it, Judas is portrayed as a hero because Jesus asks him to betray him in order to accomplish the will of God. While the discovered document is dated from the 4th century, we know it was in existence in 180 since the church leader, Irenaeus, wrote about it, identifying it as heresy.

Now, I don't think either of these events has caused committed Christians to abandon their faith. But it can have a subtle eroding effect on our confidence in our faith and in the Bible we base it upon— fastening little burrs of doubt on key elements of belief. Then, when I read the results of a Gallup poll telling us that only four in ten Americans know Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount and a majority can't name the four Gospels, it raises concern about people's ability to distinguish fact from fiction when they don't even know the basic facts. So, we have people walking out of the theater, having swallowed The Da Vinci Code's fiction, saying, "I didn't know Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married!" or "I didn't know Jesus wasn't considered divine until a church council took a vote!"

All this raises the questions like, “How do we know the Bible we have is the truth? If there were other gospels written that contain a different view, who’s to say that they aren’t right? Who decided to limit the Bible to just four gospels, and why these four? Did those forming the canon (our present Bible) have an agenda, trying to promote only one viewpoint and suppress others? Is what has survived as ‘orthodoxy’ simply a record of the winners writing history?”

And, in our current culture, we have a phobia about making commitments to absolute truth. We want to entertain many truths, and then pick which one suits us. All this fuss over The Da Vinci Code and the Gospel of Judas have given some an excuse to question Christianity, viewing its version of truth as rather arbitrary. They say, “It is fine for you to believe the Bible. But, I’d rather believe something else.” The denial of any absolute moral truth is part of our post-modern cultural mind set.

Most religions have their holy books– the Koran, the teachings of Zen, The Book of Mormon, or the traditions and teachings of native American Indians. Why do we claim the Bible is uniquely inspired and the Word of God? So, let’s begin with the authority of the Bible.

AUTHORITY

Christians claim a unique authority for the Bible. Our text is a good summary of the nature of Scripture: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* (2 Tim 3:16-17) I like the NIV translation. Most translations use the traditional, “inspired by God.” The NIV is taking a literal transliteration of what the Greek really says– “God-breathed.” As I often remind you, the word for “breath” and “spirit” are the same in the Greek. In other words, Scripture comes from God’s mouth, and His Spirit (breath) goes with it to empower it to do what He says. So, when we talk about the inspiration of Scripture, we mean far more than when we say Shakespeare is inspired or a piece of music is inspired. God’s Word that we have contained in the Bible is powerful, life-transforming.

God wrote the Bible through human agents. Certainly we have different styles of writing and ways of expression reflecting the education and personalities of the authors. The differences in style between Paul and Peter are obvious. And you don’t need to be a scholar to tell that the Gospel of John and I John were written by the same person. There are around 40 authors, writing over a period of 1500 yrs. in three different languages. Yet, God saw to it that they accurately wrote His revelation to them. When you think about it, it is pretty remarkable that a book written by 40 authors over 1500 yrs., and through much of that time they had no access to what others had already written, has one theme throughout from Genesis to Revelation with no contradictions in essential truth. That in itself is a miracle without precedent.

Another proof of God’s authorship is prophecy that has been fulfilled. Do you realize that God, through Daniel, clearly foretold the conquests of Alexander the Great and the division of his empire into four parts, hundreds of years before it happened? Also, the rise of the Roman empire is another clearly verifiable Daniel prophecy. In Christ’s coming, the details of his life, death and

resurrection, 332 distinct prophecies were fulfilled— all of them made at least 400-500 years prior to His coming.

The Bible itself affirms God's authorship. In 2 Peter 1:20-21, we read:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And, Jesus certainly affirms this view of the Old Testament in the Sermon on the Mount, Mtt. 5:18—

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen, will be any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Jesus even sets-off and highlights this statement with that *I tell you the truth* expression— the NIV equivalent of the KJV "verily, verily I say unto you." This is an expression Jesus uses to verbally set in bold type something especially important— a “pay attention now!” Did Jesus affirm the Old Testament was without error? Of course. In Lk. 16:17, He repeats this teaching in a different setting. In Jn. 10:35, Jesus affirms that "Scripture cannot be broken." In other words, God's promises, what He says, are absolutely reliable and trustworthy. He won't, and in fact can't change His mind.

Do you remember Dr. Spock's Baby Book? There are 73 million Americans who are considered baby boomers, born between the end of WW II and 1964. This entire generation was brought up on Dr. Spock. He was considered *the* authority on how to rear children. His book was the best selling book of all time, next to the Bible. But remember, a few years ago, Dr. Spock, now in his 70's, held a press conference and in essence said, "Oops. I was wrong. That's not the best way to raise children! My advice was far too permissive." That comes a little late, doesn't it? There were a whole bunch of boomers already messed-up because of it. As far as I know, my mother knew nothing of Dr. Spock's counsel, but she sure knew the Bible. That's why I turned out so well!

How do we know if the latest psychological reasonings are right? Can you rely on the latest counsel for marriage or behavior? Or how about the latest advice on how to live best or be happy? God has given us an absolutely reliable source book in the Bible. It cannot be wrong. It is based upon unchanging truth— truth upon which all of creation rests. It is woven into human nature and the fabric of the universe. It will never change. It was true 2000 yrs. ago, and it will be true 2000 yrs. from now.

Polly and I had Dr. Spock's Baby Book for counsel when we began as parents. When our son, Kris, was born in 1971 it was still considered a standard text. Of course, Dr. Spock said many helpful things. But, where it deviated from God's eternal truth revealed in Scripture, Polly and I took the Biblical advice— and, specifically it applied in the area of permissiveness. We went ahead and spanked Kris. And, of course, that's the area where Dr. Spock discovered, "I was wrong!"

We don't have to worry about the Bible misleading us or giving us false information. The way of salvation is clearly defined. We can be certain of our salvation. We can know the way to live life to the fullest because we have the manufacturer's handbook. The standards won't be changed.

This also means that we can't pick and choose what we want from the Bible. We must stand under its authority. Our feelings about what we like and don't like aren't the measure. What "seems right" according to our current culture isn't the point. The Bible sets the rules and standard, we don't. So, just because our society winks at adultery or sees little wrong with sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage, it doesn't mean we can ignore the Biblical standards. Unfortunately, even among Christians there is a tendency to "cultural accommodation." Then, we judge the Scriptures rather than letting them judge us.

APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS

What about these other gospels mentioned in The Da Vinci Code, and the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Thomas, and others? From about A.D. 125 to A.D. 600 people with active religious imaginations wrote numerous gospels— most of them in support of the gnostic heresy. The church classified them as "apocryphal," meaning they weren't authentic. As Origen wrote in the second century, "The church has four Gospels, but the heretics have many." The early church was well aware of these writings and understood they offered a view utterly different than the apostolic Gospels. Most all of the New Testament was completed within 30 years of Jesus' death— all of it within 60 years. The books were widely circulated, verified by the apostles. Do you remember how Peter refers to Paul's letters?

He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:16)

Some of us may agree with Peter's honest evaluation of Paul writing things "hard to understand." Peter wrote this prior to A.D. 68— and you'll note Paul's letters were already classified as "Scriptures."

We don't have time to go into the formation of the canon— our current collection in the Bible. "Canon" means standard or measure. These books in the Bible are the measure of all else. And, if you read some of these later gnostic gospels, it is not hard to tell they do not belong with the others. For instance, the Gospel of Thomas, written about a century after Matthew, Mark, and Luke, has things like the child Jesus making birds of clay and bringing them to life or striking his playmates dead and bringing them back to life. Even we can tell that doesn't belong. The canon was not at all arbitrary. Most all of these later gospels are written to support the gnostic heresy, condemned in the New Testament. I don't want to bore you with the details of the gnostic beliefs. But one part of their belief was that human beings have a little bit of god (small G) within the human self. Can you see why there is revived interest in these gnostic gospels? New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright says our modern neo-gnosticism,

"declares that the only real moral imperative is that you should then be true to what you find when you engage in that deep inward search."

That certainly appeals to our pride and our desire for us to be the center of what we believe and

decide to be true.

GOD-BREATHED

Because Scripture is “God-breathed,” it is uniquely powerful to accomplish what it says. Heb 4:12 says,

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

And, not only does God’s Word convict, it actually creates the reality of which it speaks. God spoke all of creation into being. In Isa 55:10-11 we read,

*As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Testimonies abound of the power of God’s Word in a life— transforming, healing, delivering. Sam Om, a Cambodian, escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand after three years as a Cambodian soldier and five more years as a virtual slave laborer. He had witnessed the killing fields of Cambodia. In the refugee camp he was given a Bible. Sam recalls, “It was a treasured possession. I carefully used each page to roll a cigarette.” He had smoked his way through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and was now in John. Rolling his cigarette, his eye was caught by John 3:16. He said, “The words about God’s love really struck me, because I was filled with such a deep hate.” That was the beginning of His transformation. He came to the U.S. to attend Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Now he is a pastor of a Cambodian church.

How can a single verse make such a change in a life? It is because it **is** God’s Word and His Spirit goes with it to accomplish what He says.

CONCLUSION

America used to know the incomparable value of the Bible. When the Pony Express began from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, CA there was 1900 mi. to be covered in ten days. Forty men were to ride 50 mi. each along the trail using 500 of the best horses in the West. Every ounce of weight that could be eliminated was. Saddles were especially built to be small and light. Clothes were light weight and no weapons were carried. Even horseshoes were designed to be smaller, lighter. Letters had to be written on thin paper and postage was \$5, a huge sum then. Yet, in spite of those weight considerations, every rider carried a full-sized Bible with him, presented to him when he joined the pony express.

I'd like to end with the last phrase of our text, from The Message paraphrase,
Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.