

Christ Church Communique



The Monthly Newsletter of Christ Church

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Why a Bible Teaching Church?

Not long ago, a group of people from Christ Church were meeting in our home to discuss ways to let the community know who we are, where we're at, and what we are about. And in due time, one sharp participant mentioned that we needed to effectively communicate to the community our distinctiveness, by which she meant, the reasons for which God would see fit to raise up another church in an area already dotted with churches.

Ever the academic, I engaged the question with a calculated and analytical eye and offered some reasons for which I believe that God raised up Christ Church. After a brief pause, another member of the group politely, but firmly, said, "Pastor, I understand what you said, but I could never repeat all of that to someone else. I'm here because I want to be deeply taught the Word of God and told how to apply it to my life."

This honest and direct reply to my dried out and sterile windbag analysis brought a grin to my mouth, and clearly touched off the hearts of the others in the room, who, in turn began echoing the same sentiment—"We simply want to be deeply taught the Word of God and have it applied to our lives." What a simple and necessary correction this was for me. Of course...we want to know God, through Christ Jesus as revealed in His Word, and instructed on how to apply the significance of Scripture to our lives.

Christ Church anchors itself in the Word of God. Indeed, the teaching and application of the scriptures leads our list of church essentials. It reads: "We will...

Preach the Word - The focus of each worship service, educational class, and small group meeting is the sound and effective teaching of God's Word...biblically grounded, theologically informed, expositionally developed, graciously expressed, and practically applied."

And the centrality of the scriptures appears in our listing of church distinctives: "Christ Church represents a return to the biblical theology and priorities that God Himself designed to cultivate spiritual health and holiness in the church....We have embraced the following core commitments:

Evangelical: We are committed to glorifying God in every aspect of our individual and church life. As evangelicals, we are Gospel people and Bible people, and believe in the total truthfulness of Holy Scripture. We are committed to the central doctrine of justification by grace, through faith and repentance, based upon the blood of Christ shed on our behalf on the cross of Calvary."

Make no mistake—we are Gospel people and Bible people; and Christ Church is not just a "Bible-centered" church, but a serious Bible teaching church. That's our distinctiveness—that's what we're about.

Some Objections

This all leads to some serious questions: If we are giving our lives to following Christ, and submitting ourselves to the authority of God's will and Word, what confidence can we have that the Bible is the Word of God? Put another way, if the Bible is really but a product of human invention, then are we not wasting our time and lives? And what if the Bible was originally God's revelation to us but has since been corrupted and distorted by overzealous scribes to the point that it renders the whole thing errant and, therefore, useless as an accurate disclosure of God's truth and will for us?

These are important questions. And though space limits a full treatment of this subject (I hope to one day preach a series on the origins and fidelity of the Bible), I want to take up these questions, albeit in brief compass, in this issue of the Communiqué. Because of the sheer volume of material related to this subject, and in the interest of keeping my treatment of the topic relatively tight, I will limit my present comments to the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts.¹

The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts

The Most Thoroughly Documented Work of Antiquity

In his book, The New Testament Manuscripts: Are They Reliable? (InterVarsity Press, 1981) New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce states that it is not uncommon for works of antiquity to survive in only a handful of copies. For example, Bruce indicates that only nine or ten good copies of Julius Caesar's Gallic War have survived the centuries. Levy's Roman History has survived in about twenty copies; Tacitus' Annals in two copies; Thucydides' History in eight copies. The most thoroughly documented secular work of antiquity is Homer's Iliad, which has survived in 643 manuscript copies—a relatively high number of copies.

By contrast, the New Testament text has survived in at least 5,686 Greek partial and complete copies, made by hand, and dating from either the late first or early second century through the fifteenth century. In addition to the Greek copies, the New Testament manuscripts have also survived in Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Latin, and other languages, totaling over 9,000 copies. This means that there are over 14,000 antiquated copies of the New Testament that have survived.

But further, we find that there are over 36,200 quotations by the early church Fathers dating from between the second and fourth centuries. When these quotations are compiled, the entire New Testament can be reconstructed, minus eleven verses. Quite clearly, the New Testament is, far and away, the most thoroughly documented work of antiquity.

The Earliest Copied Works of Antiquity

It should stand to reason that the closer in time a memorialization stands to the event it records, the more accurate the recording. Yet, most books from antiquity survive in copies made about 1,000 years after the original works were composed. A rare exception is Homer's Odyssey, which was first copied about 500 years after the original composition.

By contrast, most of the New Testament survives in copies made less than 200 years after the original composition, and several books of the New Testament were copied within approximately 100 years of the original. Remarkably, one fragment of the New Testament (P52) was copied within a single generation of the original. No doubt, the New Testament is the earliest copied work of antiquity, thereby underscoring its reliability.

¹ I here track much of the thinking found in Norman Geisler, Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998).

The Most Accurate Work of Antiquity

One of the most oft-heard objections to Christianity is that the Bible is “full of errors.” The charge has been around for so long, and is employed with such frequency, that when skeptics raising this claim are asked to point to some examples, their initial embarrassment often gives way to frustration: “Everybody knows it. It’s common knowledge.”

Some critics have suggested that the errors in the Bible number an astonishing 200,000—a figure so high that, if true, it would invalidate the reliability of the Bible and reduce the Christian faith to nonsense. But a closer look at this claim leads to a very different conclusion.

First, some critics have taken the liberty to exchange the concept of a variant reading for a charge of error. A variant reading occurs when a word or phrase can be rendered in more than one way. For example, if one were to ask a room of one hundred people to write down a synonym for the expression “very hot,” one might expect to receive a number of similar, but different, responses (e.g., “searing,” “scorching,” etc.). These would be variants.

Now of the supposed 200,000 “errors” in the Bible, the overwhelming majority are merely variant readings that are grammatical in nature and do not affect the intended meaning of the words or thoughts involved. Furthermore, these variant readings are spread across approximately 5,300 manuscripts, so that even one variant spelling of a single letter in one word of one verse occurring in 2,000 manuscripts is counted by the critic as representing “2,000 errors.” Such an approach to calculating “errors” is misleading at best.

Philip Schaff made a study of 150,000 documented variant readings and he found that only 400 changed the meaning of the passage, and of these, only fifty were found to be of significance. Moreover, he found that not one variant reading affected “an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching” (History of the Christian Church, Hendrickson Publishers, 177).

Textual scholars Westcott and Hort made a statistic analysis of the variant readings and found that only one variant in sixty carried any significance (See N. Geisler, 532). This resulted in an accuracy rate of 98.33%. In a follow-up study, Bruce Metzger calculated the New Testament manuscripts at 99.5% accurate. The closest competitor was Homer’s Iliad, determined to be 95% accurate (ibid., 533). Quite plainly, the New Testament manuscripts are the most accurate work of antiquity.

Conclusion

We could go on, but any reasonable and unbiased person making a study of the data must admit that the evidence for the reliability for the New Testament manuscripts is overwhelming. Without rival or peer, the New Testament is, quite simply, the most thoroughly documented, earliest copied, and most accurate work of antiquity. This leaves us with only one remaining question: “Do you believe what it says?”

To this question we could, likewise, marshal a mountain of evidence that would compel belief, if reason were all that was required to believe. Fulfilled prophecies; the internal consistency of the scriptures; the evidence from archeology; the flow of human history; the principles of logic that mandate the existence a personal (e.g., communicative), uncaused Cause; the inherent moral sensibilities of human beings; etcetera—all of which would lead any rational and unbiased observer to conclude that there must be a God and that, undoubtedly, the Bible is His revelation to human beings. Indeed, it requires considerably more faith to believe otherwise. Yet, most still do not believe. Why?

A number of years ago, while traveling by train from Budapest, Hungary to Prague, Czech Republic to deliver a series of lectures, I was asked by a university professor who shared my coach why it was that if

Christianity were true, most intellectuals did not believe it? “Quite simply,” I replied, “for the same reason that most idiots don’t believe it—they choose not to.”

Ultimately, faith in God and confidence in His Word are not matters of intellect, but of choice. And, sadly, not all eyes “see,” and not all ears “hear;” and whether as a result of pride or ignorance, most people simply choose not to believe—despite the overwhelming amount of evidence that would compel reason alone to choose otherwise. But if the facts are any help—or consequence—it must be admitted that, Christianity is a reasonable faith and that, at the very least, any thinking person has more than sufficient reason to investigate and seriously consider the truth claims of Christianity.

And for those of us already persuaded, we can turn with full confidence to the Bible and deeply study it and mine its treasures, for in doing so we will come to more fully know, and love, and serve the One who’s Word it is and be gradually, but surely, transformed into the image of His glorious Son, Jesus Christ. That’s why we are a Bible teaching church.

Grace, peace, and joy,

Robert W. Evans



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