

WHY I WOULDN'T WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN: GTCC SPRING SERIES BY JEREMY BEDENBAUGH
WEEK 6: ISN'T THE BIBLE UNRELIABLE?¹

I. CULTURAL OBJECTION TO SCRIPTURE: UNRELIABLE AND CULTURALLY REGRESSIVE

Even in places where the Bible is revered, the cultural assumption that we are the final arbiters over the Bible's truth largely prevails. And where the Bible is largely NOT revered, there usually still remains some respect for the "good parts" of Scripture. For example, I recently read an article by a prominent atheist writing an article that was highly critical of the Bible being seen as revealed truth from God, and yet while vociferously denying the divine nature of Scripture and claiming that Scripture was primitive and regressive, she still gave great support for the many "good things" taught in the Bible. However, for her and for many modern skeptics, the Bible is a mixed bag with some good, some bad, some right, some wrong, some accurate, some inaccurate. The view which holds sway in our culture today asks why we would fetter ourselves by the teachings of a Bible where "God" sometimes gets it right and often gets it wrong? In other words, why would anyone believe in and obey a Bible we "know" contains legends, myths, fiction, and culturally regressive teaching?

II. THE BIBLE IS HISTORICALLY TRUSTWORTHY

- A. Too Early to be Fabricated.** Dan Brown in the *Da Vinci Code* is merely the latest among a number of people who have argued that the Gospels were all written by the winners of history who needed to consolidate their power by spreading "Scripture" as authoritative. One of the many problems with this view is that the Gospels were written too early to be fabricated in this way. Notice the precision with which Luke begins his Gospel account:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Notice Luke's appeal to the eyewitnesses, his following all things closely, and his penchant for making it certain. The Gospels were written a mere 20 to 60 years following Jesus' death. Paul's letters, which support all of the Gospel accounts, were written *a mere 15-20 years* after the events. This being the case, it is difficult to imagine that Christianity could gain so many followers early on, were it not clearly established among those who lived in the first century that the record of Jesus' life and death was not congruent with how it had been recorded in the Gospels and Paul's letters. Paul makes this point powerfully in I Corinthians 15 when he claims that Jesus appeared after His resurrection to more than 500 people, "most of whom are still alive." In other words, legends can be fabricated but only after sufficient time has passed for all the eyewitnesses to be dead. In Jesus' case, the eyewitnesses were still alive and the truth could be easily verified.

- B. Too Counterproductive to be Faked.** Another problem with the view that the winners of history were consolidating power is the actual content of the Gospels. If their supposed aim was to impress their authority on the masses, then they would not have included most of the stories we find in the Gospels. For example, why would the apostles (the ones supposedly needing the power) have portrayed themselves as misanthropic fools, slow to believe, jerks, and cowards? How would that have helped their claims to supremacy? Why would they have invented the Lord of the universe coming and being arrested and killed like a common criminal? Why would they have included Jesus as a homeless and penniless Savior? Why would they have made women, who had no social standing and not legally allowed to present evidence or testify in court, the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection? Why would they have included Jesus seemingly trying to get out of the crucifixion by saying, "May this cup pass from me?" Why would they have included Jesus' statement that even He did not know the hour of His return? Why would they have made Jesus' followers and friends the lowest pieces of society, tax collectors, drunkards, and prostitutes? None of these things helped Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they really happened.
- C. Too Detailed to be Forged.** In our day, we can read the Bible and think, "Well, this could be a legend or I could see someone making this up to prove a point, or I can see how this might be historical fiction that has

¹ Handout and lecture adapted almost exclusively from Dr. Tim Keller of Redeemer Church, www.redeemer.com

been exaggerated over the years.” But this really misses the literary reality of the ancient world. The Bible does not read like any fiction, legend, or myth we have from that time period. You will not see literature of that time period beginning the way Luke begins his Gospel (as discussed above). C.S. Lewis: “I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this [Gospels]. There are only 2 possible views. Either this is reportage or else some unknown ancient writer without known predecessor or successor somehow anticipated the modern technique of novelistic realistic narrative. The reader who does not see this simply has not yet learned to read.”

III. THE BIBLE IS CULTURALLY TRUSTWORTHY

- A. Consider the Possibility that the Bible may not Teach what you Think.** Often people in our day and age are more troubled by the perceived cultural teachings of the Bible than they are by the historical difficulties. For instance, they believe that the Bible teaches slavery, genocide, and misogyny, all of which our culture now knows to be morally wrong. The first thing you should do when coming to a part of Scripture like this is to ask if the Bible is really teaching what you think it is. One example of this would be in Luke 24 when two disciples are terribly upset by Jesus’ crucifixion. Since they thought Him to be the Messiah, they could not believe that He was killed. Then Jesus comes and explains to them how the Scriptures teach that the Messiah HAD to die (Luke 24.25-27). Thus, they had the Scriptures wrong and needed to be instructed. I noticed this same thing in our Thursday morning Men’s Bible study. Many of us were disturbed at the way some of the ‘heroes’ of the faith, namely the patriarchs of Genesis treated women (polygamy first and foremost). It would be easy to read that, assume that the Bible endorses treating women like property, and reject the Christian faith all together. However, when we read Genesis carefully, we note that Genesis actually overturns the two biggest cultural assumptions of the day: polygamy and primogeniture. First, Genesis begins with the ideal, God-given marriage situation, one man and one woman (Genesis 2), to which Jesus notable refers in Matthew 19. Second, story after story shows the bankruptcy of having more than one wife. Having multiple wives is ruinous in story after story. So, Genesis is actually showing the problems with polygamy and by its own narrative, the author of Genesis condemns the well-worn cultural practice. The same is true with primogeniture, the right of the first born son to inherit the entire estate. Though assumed cultural practice throughout the Ancient Near East, God chooses the younger son time after time (Seth over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, David over his older brothers, etc.). So, upon closer examination, the Bible is actually AGAINST polygamy and primogeniture, but what if you simply discarded Scripture on the basis of your first reading?
- B. Consider the Possibility of your Own Cultural Blinders.** When you hear a word that is ‘offensive’ to you, you should take time to define it as the writers of Scripture do, not according to the recent events in our world. For instance, when we talk about dogs, we think of cute and cuddly pets, on whom we spend thousands of dollars, but dogs in Scripture are nasty scavenger beasts (Jer. 15.3, Phil. 3.2). The same is true of other concepts as well. When we hear the word ‘slavery’ in Scripture, we automatically think 18-19th century, race-based, lifelong, African slavery. None of this was true of slaves in Rome who were compensated, indentured for a period of time (rather than lifelong), not chosen by race, afforded positions of great power and prominence, etc. Thus, we must learn to read with the author’s eyes, not our own.
- C. Consider the Possibility of your Unexamined Assumption of Cultural Superiority.** Texts you find difficult and offensive are ‘common sense’ to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your great grandchildren just as many of your great grandparents’ beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture (on the basis of something that to you does not seem to be “in tune with the times”) is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme (Tim Keller, *Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs*). One good example of this would be to consider the Bible’s teaching on Sex contrasted with its teaching on forgiveness. Our culture looks at the Bible’s teaching on sex and things, how culturally regressive and restricting. But our culture looks at Jesus’ teaching on forgiving us our sins and removing our guilt and loving enemies and thinks it is great. However, if we take those two teachings to the Middle East, they will see them in just the opposite way, they will love our teaching on sex (even if they think it not strict enough!) but they will have total disdain for Scripture’s teaching on forgiving enemies. So, why should we get rid of the Bible simply because it offends some cultural assumptions somewhere? Doesn’t it actually make sense that if the Bible were from God that it would transcend human cultures and man-created structures? Doesn’t it make sense that God would offend every culture at some point of belief and/or practice? Would you want to miss

out on all the Christianity could be to you simply because it offends one belief you have that might itself be a laughingstock in 50-100 years?

IV. THE BIBLE IS PERSONALLY TRUSTWORTHY

A. The Bible is All About Jesus—Does absolute submission to the Bible lead to a cold, legalistic faith? Actually, a completely authoritative Bible is not the enemy but the prerequisite of a warm personal relationship with Christ. Notice what Jesus' disciples say in Luke 24, that their "hearts burned within them" when Jesus explained the Scriptures to them. The Scripture is the way into this relationship with God. What is it that Jesus explains to them? In verse 27 he explains that everything written in the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) was about Him! Recently Tom told us in a sermon about a man who tried to literally obey everything in the Bible which led to a comical year for him in many regards. In the end he found it fruitless, and I would say the reason behind that is that he didn't understand that all the stories, laws, regulations, and teachings in the O.T. were about Jesus! If you simply try to 'obey' the Bible without that understanding, you will have a cold faith (see II Cor. 3.6 and the previous lecture on hypocrisy for more). But when Jesus shows that the whole O.T. is about Him, the disciples' hearts burn within them. If you think the Bible is all about you, then you don't need a Messiah who dies for you; all you need is the rules. Is it all about you or all about Him? As an example, take the teaching on the Temple in the O.T. Is it there to tell you that if you obey all the Temple rules, and if you're like the faithful Israelites, that God will bless you? No, Jesus comes and Himself claims to be the Temple. Jesus Himself claims to be the meeting point of heaven and earth, the place where God Himself dwells, the place where forgiveness is offered, and the One who is the world's true sacrifice. It pointed to Him, as did all the things in the Temple, the light the bread, the altar, the door, etc. Jesus says, I am the Temple where the true sacrifice for sins takes place. Thus, the Scriptures get personal, it becomes an encounter, you begin to want Him, to want to know Him. It's all about Him, and isn't that good news? You have longings in your heart for love, security, purpose, satisfaction, and joy that nothing else in this world can provide. It is only provided in Him.

B. The Bible is All Authoritative. You don't only have to understand that it's all about Him, you also have to submit to Him. The movie, *The Stepford Wives* provide a humorous example of men getting exactly what they want in a spouse—a beautiful, young woman who always wants to have sex, never nags, never contradicts, and only serves. The idea sounds great at first, but you quickly realize that the absence of conflict, disagreement, and misunderstanding serves to reinforce that it is not a real person but a robot. If you can pick and choose the things you like and discard what you don't like, you have destroyed the relationship—in fact, there is no relationship. The same will happen if you pick the Bible apart like that. What kind of God would God be if He could never contradict you, never offend you, never infuriate you, and never come after you? Unless you have a completely authoritative Bible, you have a Stepford God, a God of your own making. It's not a real God; it's just YOU. Thus, the authoritative Bible is a precondition, not an enemy, of a warm personal relationship with God. If you want your heart to burn with you then go where the Scripture is taught and personally dig into it and feed on it.

V. FURTHER RESOURCES

The Origin of the Bible, edited by Philip Comfort, is a good introduction to the authority and perfection of Scripture from a team of good theologians.

Christ and the Bible, by John Wenhan, is a very helpful survey of how Jesus Christ viewed the Old Testament.

The Canon of Scripture, by F.F. Bruce, is a thorough book on how the 66 books of the Protestant canon came to be.

From Ancient Text to Modern Translations, by David Ewart, is a very helpful and thorough book surveying how the Bible went from the hands of the original authors to the Bible we hold in our hand today.

Are the New Testament Documents Reliable, by F.F. Bruce, is a good survey of the accuracy and credibility of the New Testament.

The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant, by Walter Kaiser. Kaiser shows how the Old Testament documents are not only historically/culturally reliable, but also relevant for our lives.

The Indestructible Book, by Ken Connolly, is a fascinating historical look at how the Scriptures have been both opposed and adored over the ages.

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels by Craig Blomberg.

Getting the Message, by Daniel Dorani, provides insight, guidance, and practical wisdom for studying the Scriptures.

What the Bible is All About, by Henrietta Means, is a good book-by-book overview of the Bible.

Knowing Scripture by R.C. Sproul