



ISSUE

24.20

May 15, 2022

Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

Has the Bible Become Hopelessly Corrupt? by Doy Moyer

Believers are familiar with mischaracterizations of both the Bible and their faith. One of the most common charges and misunderstandings has to do with whether or not we can trust the Bible based on the fact that we don't have the original documents. For example, in a *Newsweek* article by Kurt Eichenwald entitled, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin" (Dec. 23, 2014), we read:

No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we've all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.

The writer then regurgitates typical skeptical claims. The essence of this is that the Bible is so corrupted that we cannot possibly know it or understand it. No one today has read the Bible because no one actually has a copy of the Bible as it was originally written. In order to make this case, however, much is misrepresented.

A Telephone Game?

Skeptics commonly refer to the copying of the New Testament as some ancient form of the telephone game. We all know how corrupted an initial message can become when whispered in the ear of another, who then passes it on down the line. This, however, completely strawmans the concept of oral tradition in the ancient

world (see Eddy and Boyd for a detailed discussion of ancient oral tradition). It was no telephone game. The oral tradition goes right back to the events that were very openly and publicly presented in multiple venues in a short time. This was not a whisper in individual ears, told one by one in private. This was shouted out to crowds who knew what happened right from the beginning. As Peter told thousands on Pentecost, **“Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know”** (Acts 2:22, NASB).

“We Cannot Know”

One of most basic points missed by the skeptics is found within

their own arguments. They assume that we cannot possibly know the original text because it was so hopelessly corrupted by the copying process. They fail to recognize this one basic fact: the only way we can know that the copies were so hopelessly corrupted from the original text is to have the original text in front of us. We cannot say that something does not accurately represent the original if we cannot know the original in the first place. It is a self-defeating argument. If we really cannot know the original text, then they have no more warrant for saying it is corrupted than they think we have for saying it is accurate. The best they could say is, “we don’t know,” but do they even want to leave open the possibility that it could be accurate?

So Many Errors?

Skeptics commonly cite the fact that all of these copies that we have are just riddled with errors. Many say, as argued in the *Newsweek* article by citing Bart Ehrman, that there are more errors in the manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament. Yet how often will they follow that up with the recognition that the reason there are so many errors in the copies is because there are so many copies? As Daniel Wallace pointed out in a debate with Ehrman, if we had only one copy, there would be no differences. Yet there is no ancient work so well attested as the Bible. The New Testament has more manuscripts, closer to the originals in time, and wider spread in distribution than any other ancient work can boast. It’s not even close. In fact, there is so much available for study and comparison that some have called it an “embarrassment of riches.”



Olsen Park Church of Christ

The wealth of material that is available for determining the wording of the original New Testament is staggering: more than fifty-seven hundred Greek New Testament manuscripts, as many as twenty thousand versions, and more than one million quotations by patristic writers. In comparison with the average ancient Greek author, the New Testament copies are well over a thousand times more plentiful. If the average-sized manuscript were two and one-half inches thick, all the copies of the works of an average Greek author would stack up four feet high, while the copies of the New Testament would stack up to over a *mile* high! This is indeed an embarrassment of riches” (Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 82).

Ehrman, writing with Metzger, knows this:

Besides textual evidence derived from the New Testament Greek manuscripts and from early versions, the textual critic has available the numerous scriptural quotations included in the commentaries, sermons, and other treatises written by early Church fathers. Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament (126).

Get that? Even if we lost every single manuscript copy, the quotes and citations from the patristic writers alone would suffice to virtually reconstruct the entire New Testament. This is the same skeptic who does not believe we can know what the original said, but there is no way to speak of the “reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament” if the text is hopelessly corrupted.

Further, skeptics must admit that the vast majority of these errors in the copies (about 99%) make absolutely no difference to the message of the text. Most of the errors are easily enough rooted out so that it is clear what the

text says. Even among the errors that are a little more substantial, the meaning of the text can still be discerned. For that 1% in more serious question, none will affect theological doctrine.

Take, for example, the oft-cited problem with the ending of Mark 16. Let’s assume that the ending should be dismissed as a late addition. Will that affect our understanding of preaching the gospel or of baptism (vv. 15-16)? Even without verse 16, do we have sufficient passages, not in question, to know what the Bible teaches about baptism? Of course we do. The point is that even when there is a larger section in question, nothing is changed theologically. No major doctrine hinges on a questionable text.

At the foundation of the debate is the problem of presuppositions. As Mark D. Roberts (not the editor of *Pressing On*, a different one) pointed out in his work, “if you look squarely at the facts as they are widely understood, and if you do not color them with pejorative bias or atheistic presuppositions, then you’ll



find that it's reasonable to trust the Gospels" (20).

Sources:

Eichenwald, Kurt. "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin." *Newsweek* (Dec. 23, 2014) <https://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/02/thats-not-what-bible-says-294018.html>.

Eddy, Paul Rhodes, and Gregory A. Boyd. *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

Komoszewski, J. Ed, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006.

Metzger, Bruce M. and Bart D. Ehrman. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 4th ed. NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Roberts, Mark D. *Can We Trust the Gospels? Investigating the Reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007.

Pressing On 5.2 (Feb., 2015): 20-22



Editor's Note: Sunday, May 15 Olsen Park begins a Gospel Meeting with Doy Moyer. At 9:00, 9:30, and 10:30 on Sunday and 7:00 p.m he will preach for us. Monday through Wednesday at 10:00 a.m., his wife Laura will teach a ladies' class.

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