**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**How We Got The New Testament (Part 2)**

Last week on our program we talked about how it was decided that the 27 books of the New Testament should be there. But the question I want us to deal with today is how do we know that over a period of almost 2000 years these books have come down to us as they were written by the inspired men? There are those who believe that we cannot be assured that what we have in our New Testaments is what was written by the apostles and prophets of old. You may hear someone say, “You know, the Bible has been copied and recopied for hundreds of years and has been translated many, many times. I’m sure some of these copyists and translators made some mistakes and changes along the way. So we can’t really be sure that what we have in the Bible today is what the original writers actually said.” Is this true? Can we not be assured that what we have in our Bible is what was originally written? This is the question we want to address on our program today. And particularly we are asking the question, can we be assured that the New Testament scriptures conveys what was originally written by the apostles and prophets, because if the New Testament that we have is accurate, then all the Bible is accurate. If the New Testament is accurate and what it says is true, then what it says about the Old Testament scriptures is accurate. And so the question we are addressing this morning is “Can we be assured that what we have in our New Testament accurately conveys what was originally written?”

Let me say first of all that it is true that today we do not have any of the original manuscripts of the New Testament in the very hand-writing of the authors. What we do have are manuscript copies of the original writings. They didn’t have printing presses in those days, and so the copies were handwritten. The contention is that these handwritten copies have been corrupted so that we do not have what was originally written. They say that those who copied the original writings made mistakes, not necessarily intentional, but they made mistakes nonetheless and so what we have now is not what was originally written. Let me illustrate what is believed by many. Suppose a writer in the first century wrote “Christians love the lord.” A couple of generations later one of the copyists, by a slip of the pen, changed the “l” in lord to a “w.” The phrase then said, “Christians love the word.” The original documents deteriorated over time and all we have left is the corrupted phrase “Christians love the word.” And then another generation later a copyist changed the letter “o” in the word “love” to an “i,” and the phrase then said, “Christians live the word.” And so all we have left that has come down to us is the phrase “Christians live the word,” a phrase that doesn’t mean the same thing as “Christians love the lord,” which was what was originally written. And so the belief is that because of the copyists mistakes in copying what we now have in our New Testaments are corrupted phrases and statements which do not reflect what was original written.

This argument is based on a false premise of how the NT Scriptures came down to us. The thinking is that the New Testament documents were changed in one generation and then changed again in the next generation, and then in the next so that what we have is nothing like what the original was. This is not how the New Testament documents came to us.

A more accurate description of how the New Testament came down to us is that not just one copy was made of the documents each generation, but multiple copies were being made each generation and circulated among the churches. If a copy was corrupted, let’s say in the third generation of copies, it would be easily discovered because of the many other copies to compare it with. For example, going back to our illustration earlier, when the original document that stated “Christians love the lord” was copied, not just one copy was made, but many copies. And in every generation many copies were made. And so if in the third generation a copyist, by slip of the pen, wrote “Christians love the word,” rather than “the lord,” there were many other copies by which they could compare, and be able to detect a mistake. Now we have access to over 5000 manuscript copies of the New Testament books. And these manuscripts are scattered throughout the world. There is not just one person or one group that has possession of all these manuscripts. There are many. You see, if one person or group decided to tamper with a manuscript in their possession, it would be detected because of the many other manuscripts that we have access to throughout the world. Someone says, “It would be nice if we had the original writings of the apostles and prophets. We then could be assured that what we have is what they originally wrote.” We could be assured, if we knew for sure no one had tampered with the original. Even if we had the originals, there would still be the question in our mind, “did the one who has possession of an original change it in any way?” But with thousands of copies of the originals scattered throughout the world there is no way that one person or a group of people could change a manuscript copy without it being detected. We have greater assurance that what we have reflects the original, than if we had possession of the originals themselves.

But let us further investigate the question, “how reliable are the copies that we have?” Do they accurately reflect the originals? The historical reliability of the New Testament should be tested by the same criteria that is used on all historical documents. One of the tests by which historical documents are tested to determine their accuracy is “the bibliographical test.” Let me emphasize that this test is applied to all ancient historical documents to determine their reliability, not just the New Testament. This test used to determine the reliability of ancient writings such as Julius Caesar’s “Gallic Wars,” the “Annals” of Tacitus, and Homer’s “Iliad,” just to name a few. Questions that are raised in the bibliographical test are: 1) How many copies of the documents are available? 2) What length of time is there between the original and the earliest existing copy? A shorter interval of time would increase our assurance in the reliability of the copies. 3) What variances exist between the copies? When these questions are applied to the New Testament what answers do we have? And how does the New Testament compare with other documents of antiquity?

Now, we have already answered the question how many copies of the New Testament are available. Josh McDowell quotes from Geisler who says, “Counting Greek copies alone, the New Testament is preserved in some 5,656 partial and complete manuscript portions that were copied by hand from the second through the fifteenth centuries.” (Geisler, GIB, 385)” Dear friend, no other ancient writing can even approach these numbers. The closest is Homer’s “Iliad” with 643 copies. Caesar’s “Gallic Wars” has 10 copies, the History of Herodotus – 8 copies, Livy (History of Rome) – 20 copies.

And what is the length of time between when the original was written and the earliest copies? There are several papyri fragments that date within 50 to 100 years from the time it was originally written. One of these is the John Rylands fragment of a portion of the book of John which dates about 125 to 135 AD. We have the Chester Beatty Papyri which includes several books of the New Testament dated in the third century, about 200 years after the New Testament was written. We have several nearly complete New Testament Greek manuscripts which were copied within 300 – 400 years from the time it was originally written. You may think that 100 years or 400 years is a long time. But compare that with other ancient writings. Caesar’s “Gallic Wars” were written around 100 to 44 B.C. The earliest copies date to about 900 AD. That is about a thousand years difference. The earliest copies of the History of Herodotus is 1350 years removed from the original. The “Annals” of Tacitus – 950 years. Yet, scholars do not doubt the reliability of these works. When you apply this standard to the New Testament, the New Testament passes the test easily.

What about the variations in the manuscripts? It is true there are some variations between the many thousands of manuscripts available. But the vast majority are very minor, differences in spelling or in phraseology, etc. Doy Moyer in his book Standing On Solid Ground states, “Only about 40 lines (or 400 words) are in doubt, which means only one-half of one percent is in question. That is compared to over 5 percent in the *Iliad*. Substantial variations of the manuscripts of the Bible form about one-thousandth of the entire text. That is amazing!” But we need to emphasize that these variations do not affect doctrine. Josh McDowell says in his book Evidence That Demands A Verdict, “That textual variations do not endanger doctrine is emphatically stated by Sir Frederic Kenyon (one of the great authorities in the field of New Testament textual criticism):” and then McDowell quotes Kenyon, “‘One word of warning, already referred to, must be emphasized in conclusion. No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading….”

The fact is of all the ancient writings, the New Testament is the best-attested book that has come to us from the ancient world.

To sum up the bibliographical test F.F. Bruce has written, “The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.” (That is quoted by Doy Moyer.)

But there is one other important point we need to remember as we ponder this subject, and that is, we should never forget that God’s hand of providence was guiding the process of preserving His word. He promised that His word would not pass away, but it would endure forever (1 Peter 1:24-25). Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into “all truth” (John 16:13). That promise was fulfilled. Peter said that God had given them “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). The “all truth” was revealed, it did not pass away, and we have it now. There have been those who have tried to destroy the Scriptures, but failed. Diocletian, Roman Emperor, decreed in AD 305 that the literature of Christians should be destroyed. He believed that if you could destroy the literature, you could end the movement. Other powerful forces have tried to destroy the word of God, but have failed to do so. Why? Because of the providence of God. God promised His word would endure forever, and we believe it was done. The New Testament Scriptures, along with the Old Testament, compose the complete Revelation of God to man. When we read our Bibles today, we can be assured that we have the reliable, infallible word of God that was written by divinely inspired men, and was preserved by the Almighty God.

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