



Bible and Church Conference: the reliability of the New Testament

Chris Knight

We're all familiar with the questions:

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how do you know that the events described in the New Testament really happened?

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don't the differences between the Gospels, and between all the different Greek manuscripts that exist, show that we can't know what was originally written (even if the original writer did happen to get it right)?

§ don't all the other Gospels show a different Jesus – in some ways a 'better' Jesus? Why shouldn't we rely on those instead?

The Bible and Church Conference held at Westminster Chapel, London on 20th June 2009 faced these sorts of questions head on – with a scholarly approach made accessible to the layman through three detailed but clear presentations. The conference well met its aim: "*to provide Christians with reliable scholarly evidence in support of the historical basis and reliability of the New Testament and to equip them to share that faith with confidence.*"

The three speakers from Tyndale House each showed that Christians have no need to fear such questions – the weight of evidence shows that the New Testament *is* reliable and *can* be trusted.

The New Testament history

In the first session, Dr Peter Williams asked, and answered, the question: "*Have we got the history right?*". He reminded us of C.S. Lewis' Trilemma

– the three possible responses to the question of who Jesus was: "Lord, Liar or Lunatic". Dr Williams suggested that the most common answer to that question today is "Legend". People simply do not believe that the New Testament can be giving an accurate account of who Jesus is. This conference was aimed at providing Christians with sufficient evidence that they could discount this response – forcing the sceptic back to a real consideration of how they would respond to Jesus Christ. A helpful reminder at the start of what could have been a purely academic exercise, that our aim is to get people to meet with Jesus – not simply to accept a set of beliefs about the historicity of the New Testament.

Dr Williams took us through a rapid tour of first- and second-century AD non-Christian writings, showing just how much these writings could tell us about Jesus and the early church while confirming various aspects of the New Testament accounts. He next considered how well the Gospels stood up to a test of their knowledge of first-century Palestine. One area he considered was the presence of Jewish personal names in the New Testament. Studies of names outside the New Testament have shown that first-century Jews were highly unimaginative when it came to naming their children. Over a quarter of women were called Mary or Salome, and 15% of men were called Simon or Joseph. The New Testament percentages are very similar. The Jewish names in the New Testament are typical of first-century Palestine, showing that these documents were not concocted much later. Indeed, it helps to confirm that the authors were writing historical accounts, for names changed over time and varied outside of Palestine – name studies in Egypt, for example, show a different list of the most common Jewish names.

The fact that names are the most difficult thing to remember about people shows that these accounts have the 'ring of truth' – the best explanation of the fact that the authors show good knowledge of names of this period is that they are writing historical accounts of people from that time. Dr Williams followed up with further fascinating details of how names are used in the New Testament compared to names used in the later Apocryphal Gospels, for example. Each time, the historical reliability of the New Testament is confirmed.

Dr Williams also explained various other tests – the test for corroboration between the gospels (using the feeding of the 5000 as an example) shows the way that a detail in one of the canonical Gospel, mentioned in passing, helps to explain another detail in one of the other canonical Gospels. The accounts are simply too complex and too complementary in nature to be forgeries or fiction.

The New Testament text

In the second session, Dr Dirk Jongkind considered "*Have we got the text right?*" He brought his expertise from his analysis of the Codex Sinaiticus, to a consideration of whether we could arrive at a reliable version of the original new Testament writings, given the many variations in the different manuscripts that are available to scholars. Dr Jongkind provided 6 reasons why we can believe that the text we have is reliable, explaining the value of each factor: the widespread copying of the New Testament (because materials were subject to deterioration), the fact that we have some very old manuscripts, with a large quantity of manuscripts, with some very good quality manuscripts, with nothing of the New Testament missing from these manuscripts.

The bare facts of variations in the Greek New Testament manuscripts is at first worrying. It is estimated that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 differences, in a New Testament of about 134,000 words. It seems that almost every word must be debatable. But Dr Jongkind explained the types of variants that this included – name spelling variations (reminding us that even in Shakespeare's day, his name had 20 or so different renderings during his own lifetime). Many of the variants are simply untranslatable. Technically they are different, but the meaning is identical.

Dr Jongkind gave a detailed account of one other type of variant that Bart Ehrman (in his book *Whose Word Is It?* or, in the US edition, *Misquoting Jesus*) uses to support his view that scribes changed copies of the New Testament for theological reasons. The passage relates to Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:25-52). Ehrman points out a number of variants where "*his father and mother*" is changed to "*Joseph and his*

mother" (eg. in some manuscripts of Luke 2:33), and argues that this was deliberately introduced to avoid the possible misunderstanding that Joseph was Jesus' physical father. However, Dr Jongkind's detailed examination of the whole passage shows that if this were the case, the scribes were very inattentive, or quickly got bored, for they failed to introduce this same change in wording just a few verses later (see verses 27, 33, 41, 43 and 48 for similar use of the phrases "*his parents*" and "*father and mother*"). Coupled with a consideration of which manuscripts contain the variants and when they were written, the best explanation is that these are straightforward copying errors and there was no conspiracy to corrupt the text to avoid uncomfortable issues. The value of detailed Christian scholarship to rebut unfounded grounds for rejecting the New Testament came over here, and over and over during the day.

The New Testament Jesus

In the third session, Dr Simon Gathercole looked at the question: "*Have we got Jesus right?*". Starting off in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* territory, Dr Gathercole considered some of the defining characteristics of the canonical Gospels and went on to compare these with the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Judas. He describes some of these as protest documents, written to criticise the mainstream Christian church. By a comparison of the content, the date of writing and consideration of their display (or not) of knowledge of various aspects of the first-century background, none of these stand the test of being based on reliable eyewitness accounts of Jesus.

Questions and Answers

The final session of the day, "*Your Turn!*", allowed questions to be put to the speakers. These covered a broad range of questions (adding to the more specific question times at the end of the three earlier sessions), showing once again the depth of knowledge and wisdom of the three speakers. Questions covered ranged across the formation of the New Testament canon; how we can know that Peter, an uneducated fisherman, wrote accurately in Greek what he wanted to express; and what is the best English Bible translation. A final question asked how we can

use this material with friends in conversation. Dr Williams suggested that while we take questions seriously, we should also expect questioners to take our answers seriously, so that we are not led on an endless series of question after question, getting nowhere. I liked the suggested challenge given such a scenario: "*If I answer your top three questions satisfactorily, then will you read a Gospel and discuss it with me?*" An alternative "*then ...*" can of course be given – "*come to church*" or whatever is appropriate.

Learning more

I have only been able to give you hints at the full depth of knowledge that the speakers shared at this conference. The day was videoed and the DVD can be ordered from the Bible and Church website. Get a copy for your Church, CU, homegroup, study group or just to inform yourself better and be inspired and enthused by the quantity of evidence that the New Testament really can be trusted.

For more information about Bible and Church, visit www.bibleandchurch.com.

For more information on Tyndale House's 4Gospel Project, visit 4Gospels.com.

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