

# Does It Matter?

by F.F Bruce

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*The reliability of the New Testament documents is crucial for understanding the Christian faith and its impact on human history.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 16:16, Mark 1:14, Luke 1:1, John 20:31, 1 Corinthians 15:3

**Topics:** "New Testament", "Historical Reliability"

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## Description

F.F. Bruce emphasizes the importance of the reliability of the New Testament documents in Christianity. He argues that the essence of Christianity is not just a code of ethics or a metaphysical system, but rather good news rooted in historical events like the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The historical 'once-for-allness' of Christianity, as recorded in the New Testament, is crucial for understanding the faith's foundation. Even from a purely historical perspective, the character and influence of Jesus, as portrayed in the New Testament, have significantly impacted human history, making the reliability of these records a vital subject of investigation.

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## Transcript

Does it matter whether the New Testament documents are reliable or not? Is it so very important that we should be able to accept them as truly historical records? Some people will very confidently return a negative answer to both these questions. The fundamental principles of Christianity, they say, are laid down in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the New Testament; their validity is not affected by the truth or falsehood of the narrative framework in which they are set. Indeed, it may be that we know nothing certain about the Teacher into whose mouth they are put; the story of Jesus as it has come down to us may be myth or legend, but the teaching ascribed to Him—whether He was actually responsible for it or not—has a value all its own, and a man who accepts and follows that teaching can be a true Christian even if he believes that Christ never lived at all.

This argument sounds plausible, and it may be applicable to some religions. It might be held, for example, that the ethics of Confucianism have an independent value quite apart from the story of the life of Confucius himself, just as the philosophy of Plato must be considered on its own merits, quite apart from the traditions that have come down to us about the life of Plato and the question of the extent of his indebtedness to Socrates. But the argument can be applied to the New Testament only if we ignore the real essence of Christianity. For the Christian gospel is not primarily a code of ethics or a metaphysical system; it is first and foremost good news, and as such it was proclaimed by its earliest preachers. True,

they called Christianity 'The Way' and 'The Life'; but Christianity as a way of life depends upon the acceptance of Christianity as good news. And this good news is intimately bound up with the historical order, for it tells how for the world's redemption God entered into history, the eternal came into time, the kingdom of heaven invaded the realm of earth, in the great events of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The first recorded words of our Lord's public preaching in Galilee are: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news.'

That Christianity has its roots in history is emphasised in the Church's earliest creeds, which fix the supreme revelation of God at a particular point in time, when 'Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate'. This historical 'onceforallness' of Christianity, which distinguishes it from those religious and philosophical systems which are not specially related to any particular time, makes the reliability of the writings which purport to record this revelation a question of first-rate importance.

It may be replied that while admittedly the truth of the Christian faith is bound up closely with the historicity of the New Testament, the question of the historicity of this record is of little importance for those who on other grounds deny the truth of Christianity. The Christian might answer that the historicity of the New Testament and the truth of Christianity do not become less vitally important for mankind by being ignored or denied. But the truth of the New Testament documents is also a very important question on purely historical grounds. The words of the historian Lecky, who was no believer in revealed religion, have often been quoted:

'The character of Jesus has not only been the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice, and has exerted so deep an influence, that it may be truly said, that the ample record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and to soften mankind, than all the disquisitions of philosophers and than all the exhortation of moralists.'

But the character of Jesus can be known only from the New Testament records; the influence of His character is therefore tantamount to the influence of the New Testament records. Would it not, then, be paradoxical if the records which, on the testimony of a rationalist historian, produced such results, were devoid of historical truth? This, of course, does not in itself prove the historicity of these records, for history is full of paradoxes, but it does afford an additional reason for seriously investigating the trustworthiness of records which have had so marked an influence on human history. Whether our approach is theological or historical, it does matter whether the New Testament documents are reliable or not.

'It is', perhaps, not superfluous to remark that before going on to consider the trustworthiness of the New Testament writings, it would be a good idea to read them!

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