

Why We Believe the Bible

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the composition of the Bible, focusing on the canon and the exclusion of certain books like the Apocrypha. It explores the Jewish view of the canon, Jesus' perspective on Scripture, and the formation of the Hebrew canon. The sermon discusses the process of canonization in the early church, emphasizing the recognition rather than the creation of the New Testament canon. It also touches on the preservation of the biblical manuscripts, the role of text criticism, and the significance of affirming the inerrancy of the original manuscripts despite not having them.

Duration: 56:07

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16, Luke 24:44, Matthew 5:17, 2 Peter 3:16, Ephesians 2:20, 1 Corinthians 14:37, Jude 1:3, John 16:13, 2 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Biblical Canon", "Inerrancy of Scripture"

Description

This sermon delves into the composition of the Bible, focusing on the canon and the exclusion of certain books like the Apocrypha. It explores the Jewish view of the canon, Jesus' perspective on Scripture, and the formation of the Hebrew canon. The sermon discusses the process of canonization in the early church, emphasizing the recognition rather than the creation of the New Testament canon. It also touches on the preservation of the biblical manuscripts, the role of text criticism, and the significance of affirming the inerrancy of the original manuscripts despite not having them.

Transcript

Father, please, for one more hour here, I pray for your help. We need to make progress in going deep with your word. And so I ask for your assistance again, in Jesus' name, amen.

Which books make up the Bible? That is, which books are in the canon? There are other books in the time of the Bible that are in the Catholic canon, for example, namely the Apocrypha, which include books like these, Esdras, 1 and 2, Tobit, Judith, and so on. These are the books that you would find in the Apocrypha. Now the question would be, one question, why don't we have those in our Bible? Most of those come from the period between the Testaments, intertestamental period, now called Second Temple Judaism.

The belief concerning those books among the Jews was this, the rabbinical literature, this is from the Talmud, after the latter prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel. But they still availed themselves of the bat kol, daughter of the voice. So the typical Jewish view in

Jesus' day was that after the minor prophets, there wasn't any inspiration of Scripture.

Now the question is, is that what Jesus thought? Is that what we should think, or not? Here's the Jewish canon that I'm going to argue for, because that's what's in our Bible, and I think we can know why. The Hebrew canon was traditionally 24 books, which include all of our 39 and no more, and these are divided into three sections. The reason it goes from 39 to 24 is because they combine some that we separate.

I'll show you what they are in a minute. There are three sections in the Old Testament Jewish Hebrew canon, Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim. That's the Hebrew word for law, prophets, writings.

If you take the T, the N, and the CH, and put A's between them, you get Tanakh. So if you're talking to a Jewish friend today, and you want to talk about his Bible, if you use the word Tanakh, he'll know exactly what you're talking about. That means the Hebrew canon, and he'll appreciate that.

In fact, if you call it the Old Testament, he won't like you, because it's not the Old Testament, it's the only Testament. You Christians, quit calling it Old Testament. We do believe it's old and has been superseded by the new, but they don't, and so this would be their word, and that would be fine to use it, the Tanakh.

So the Torah in the Jewish Bible, and I'm going to argue that this is Jesus' Bible, contains Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The prophets, the Nevi'im, the prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, first and second combined, Kings combined, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the minor prophets, all in one book, twelve books in one book, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephani, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and the writings, Ketuvim, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, one book, and Chronicles, one book, and that adds up to twenty-four, and they're exactly the same as the thirty-nine that we have in our Old Testament. Thus the canon of the Jews began with Genesis and ended with Chronicles.

This is the order, I just gave you the order that they occur in the Hebrew Old Testament, different from our English Bible, because our English Bible is based on the order of the Greek translation, the Septuagint, of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, but the earliest Christian witnesses show that the apocryphal books included in the Septuagint were not counted as canonical. It's very interesting that our English Bible is given in the order in the Old Testament of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, but it omits all the apocryphal books which were in the Greek Testament. So you know it's a pretty conscious choice not to include those books.

Now, do we have any New Testament pointers to the existence and the extent of the Old Testament canon? Here are a few. Paul assumed the legitimacy of the Scriptures that were being taught to Jewish children. So he says in 2 Timothy 3, but as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believe knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

So Eunice and Lois, these Jewish women were teaching Timothy, and Paul affirmed that he should believe those books. There's no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his day over what the extent of the Scriptures was. He seemed to assume that their Bible was his Bible, and he made remarkable claims about its authority, which we'll see later.

The Scriptures cannot be broken, he said to them, the Scriptures that they agreed on. The three-part Jewish division of the Old Testament is assumed by Jesus. Luke 24, 44, now he said to them, these are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms, and almost everybody agrees that the word Psalms here is simply a replacement of the word writings because it's the biggest and most dominant book in the writings, so stands for all the writings, not that Christ rejected all the other writings.

So those three groups, he said, spoke of him. The Jewish order of the closed Jewish canon is assumed. Now here we get, I think, the most significant argument for saying that Jesus' Bible, his Jewish canon, not the canon that included the Apocrypha.

Why do we say that? So here's the argument. See if I can reconstruct it for you. We've got Luke 11, 49 to 51, and Jesus says this, therefore also the wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, that the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.

Now what he's trying to do with that statement is to say all the prophets in the Old Testament, and he mentions one in Genesis 3, 4, the very first prophet to die, Abel. And the last one he mentions is a prophet named Zechariah who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Well, who is that? Well, it isn't the last chronological martyr in the Old Testament.

Chronologically, the last martyr in the Old Testament was Uriah, the son of Shemaiah, whose death is described in Jeremiah 26, 20 to 23, and he died during the reign of Jehoiakim, who reigned from 609 to 598 B.C. However, in 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Jewish Old Testament canon, it says there was a Zechariah killed in the temple court. It goes like this. So this is 2 Chronicles 24.

Now picture this, so I can get you with me. Our Old Testament ends with Malachi. The Hebrew Old Testament ends with 2 Chronicles, and Jesus has said they will be responsible for the blood of all the prophets from the one in the beginning of Genesis to the end of 2 Chronicles.

Zechariah. So let's read about that one. The Spirit of the God took possession of Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, the priest, and he stood above the people and said to them, thus says God, why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you.

But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones. So Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, 2 Chronicles 24, is stoned to death with stones in the court of the house of the Lord. And Jesus refers to him, Abel to Zechariah, when there's a Uriah later who's stoned.

Why? Why didn't he say from Abel to Uriah? And the answer is he's working with the Hebrew canon. That's why. Which means his Bible was the Hebrew canon, not the Apocrypha.

The Apocrypha is not in the Hebrew canon. It's those 24 books that are in the Hebrew canon, and therefore I'm arguing that when Jesus held his Bible or studied his Bible, he was studying the Hebrew canon, which is going to be very important because I'm going to argue that he said spectacular things about this book, absolutely breathtaking things about it, which would not apply, at least we have no reason to believe it would apply to the Apocrypha. According to one count by Roger Nicole, the New Testament

quotes various parts of the Old Testament as divinely authoritative over 295 times, but not once do they cite any statement of the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority.

Jude 14 and 15 does quote 1 Enoch, and Paul quotes pagan authors in Acts 17 and 28 and Titus 1 and 2, but these citations are not said to be from Scripture or to be authoritative because of their sources. Now, New Testament. My conclusion at that point is the Bible we're working with that Jesus claims to be authoritative, which I'll show shortly, these first two-thirds of the Bible are made up of the 39 books that we have, which were the same as the 24 books in the Hebrew Bible.

That's the argument so far. Now let's shift over to the New Testament. The New Testament assumed the existence of canonical scriptures.

The concept was not foreign to them or added later. Luke 24, beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures. There's Jesus and the writer of Luke saying, all the scriptures testify to me.

So there is a body of truth called the scriptures. John 5:39, you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. Acts 17:2, Paul's custom, he went into them and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the scriptures and so on.

So we're working with a New Testament conception of canon here that they didn't make it up. Let's jump down to the main point. The point here is that for the church to begin to govern its life and doctrine by more than this authoritative canon of scriptures, something similar in authority and limitation would be necessary, it seems, namely a supplementary canon.

Now, just get yourself into the mind and head of those who had lived all their lives with this canon of Old Testament. And suddenly the Messiah comes into the world and begins to teach, forms a church, commissions apostles, founds a movement. How will it function? How will it govern itself? How will it know what's true as falsehoods come at it? And I'm saying they've got already a model of a canon.

Will they not move towards a larger one? Jesus was recognized by the early church as having authority equal to and beyond the Old Testament scriptures. We're arguing now that there's coming into being the concept of a New Testament canon. How does it come into being? Jesus, He was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes.

So Jesus is emerging now as having an authority different from those who expounded the Old Testament. He seems to be aligning Himself alongside the Old Testament, even over the Old Testament, which is shaking them up. Matthew 5, 38, you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

That's a quote from the Bible, Old Testament. And He says, but I say to you, it's a breathtaking statement from a human being, do not resist Him who is evil. Or Mark 13, 31, heaven and earth will pass away, He said, but my words will not pass away.

Jesus said, I'm the way, the truth, the truth, the truth and the life. These are spectacular claims about His function in relationship to the truth of the Old Testament. Matthew 28, 18, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

Hebrews 1, God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers and prophets in many portions and in many ways in these last days, has spoken to us in His Son, aligning His Son alongside those great prophets and

therefore pressing for some kind of new or expanded canon with Jesus Himself as the center authority of it. So the point, the point here is that the teaching of Jesus would inevitably lead to an expansion of the canon of the early church. The Old Testament would be supplemented by what Jesus taught and did.

The challenge is open then for the early church, how to limit what is inevitably opened by the coming and teaching of Jesus. Theologically, a closed canon of the New Testament is what we would expect in accord with what God has inspired and preserved for us in the Old Testament. This is what Norman Anderson said, if we accept Jesus' testimony to the God-given authority of the Old Testament, it would seem intrinsically unlikely that the most stupendous event in human history, the life and death and resurrection of its incarnate Lord, would have been left by the God who had revealed it in advance without any authoritative record or explanation for future generations.

In other words, that's just simply saying we would expect that if God had seen fit to govern His people through a canon in the Old Testament, then the arrival of His Son and the perpetuation of the people of God in the church would seem to be governed by a group of books as well. Now, is that the case? Are there pointers to it? Jesus pointed in this direction and prepared the early church to expect that He not only planned a canon of teaching concerning Himself and His Word, but He would provide for it as well through authorized apostles and through inspiration. So He chose apostles.

He named them apostles. The word apostle means a sent one who goes with authoritative representation of another. So in choosing the twelve, He's choosing those who will now lay the foundation of truth in being His official representatives and were not perpetuated.

That's why in Acts 12:6, they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. That didn't happen over and over and over again, because these apostles were going to fulfill the role of authoritative, inspired spokesmen for the church. So what about inspiration? Jesus says, He who does not love me does not keep my words, and the word which you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me.

These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you, but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Now, I think the primary meaning of that sentence, that last sentence there, is to inform us and to ensure them that when it came time for them to provide authoritative teaching for the church, they would be able to do it. He would help them do it.

He would enable them to do it. I think that's Jesus' way of preparing us and them for the doctrine of the inspiration of the New Testament. Another one, John 16.

I have many more things to say to you, Jesus said, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak and He will disclose to you what is to come.

He shall glorify me, for He shall take of mine and shall disclose it to you. So there's Jesus in two places, preparing His apostles to know why He has chosen them in relationship to His church, namely, that they are going to be the repository of His future inspiration and enabling authority, to teach with authority. So the early church saw the teaching that emerged from Jesus and the apostles as comprising a completed body of truth about the faith.

And you get to see that in Jude 1.3. Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you, appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. That little Greek word is once for all. And that's an important word in the New Testament because it means that what's happening in the New Testament is unique and historically decisive and once for all.

Jesus comes once for all. He appoints twelve once for all. He inspires them to teach the church and provide the foundation for the church once for all.

And there is now a faith delivered to us once for all. It doesn't get added to century after century. Rather, what is taught every century subsequent to this takes its key from what was once for all delivered.

That's the importance of that little word there, once for all. What about Paul? Paul saw the apostolic teaching as the unrepeatable foundation of the church or the canon and saw his own teaching as the expression of the Lord's very words and command. Amazing, some of the things that he says.

Foundation. Ephesians 2.19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God's household. Having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. So he pictures the apostles and that and might mean who are also. There's a little debate about how the prophets relate to the apostles here.

But this is foundational. This is foundational. Not repeated.

You are built upon them. The church is like a temple and has a foundation with a cornerstone. And in this text, the foundation of the church is the apostles slash prophets.

Cornerstone being Christ himself. So the way to think about who are the apostles that govern the church today? Answer, right there. They're dead.

And they have written their word to us here. And we govern ourselves by submitting to this. And any elder or pastor's role in the church is to make this plain.

Structure everything according to this. Build his life around this. Teach this.

Rather than add to this. That's what foundation implies here in Ephesians 2.20. What about inspiration among the apostles and Paul's own understanding? 2 Corinthians 13.3. He says to the church, You are seeking for proof that the Christ who speaks in me. You are seeking for truth of the Christ who speaks in me.

And who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. So he believes that Christ is speaking in him. And it was controversial in his own day.

You know how often he was being criticized saying, You're not a real apostle. The real apostles are from Jerusalem. And he had to defend himself again and again as an apostle.

As one that Christ had appeared to. That was the qualification of an apostle. He had appeared to them and commissioned them.

And so he had to make a special appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road. And Paul said, I'm like one who was born out of time. I wasn't one of the twelve.

But he was the decisive spokesman for the Gentiles. And there wasn't any after him. Or 1 Corinthians 14.37. If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual.

Let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. So he's making his writings the test of all spiritual claims in the church. Amazing.

That's either, like C.S. Lewis argued, liar, lunatic, lord. Heard that argument before. Jesus is either a liar or he's a lunatic or he's true.

Same thing is true of Paul. I mean this statement is off the charts. Either he's a liar or he's a lunatic, megalomaniac, or he's an inspired apostle.

Because a talk like that is amazing. He says in 1 Corinthians 2.12. Now we have received not the spirit of the world. But the spirit of who is from God.

That we might understand the things freely given to us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom. But taught by the spirit.

Interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. That's important. Because we're here.

I don't think we're here. This is not us. This is Paul and the other band of apostles.

Authoritative spokesmen with him. And we're here. And he's interpreting spiritual things to those who have the spirit.

And God is giving to him words taught by the spirit. Not by human wisdom to do that. So Paul, I'm arguing, is making very strong claims about his own authority.

Which is where the New Testament canon is going to come from. Peter saw Paul's writings as part of an enlarging canon of Scripture. Alongside the Old Testament Scriptures.

This is very important. 2 Peter 3.16 Paul wrote to you in all his letters. Speaking in them of these things.

In which are some things hard to understand. Which the untaught and unstable distort. As they do also the rest of or the other Scriptures to their own destruction.

Do you see what that implies? Peter, the apostle, is saying of this apostle, Paul, that his writings are Scripture. That's really big. People are distorting Paul's letters.

Because they're hard to understand. Like they do the rest of the Scriptures. To their own destruction.

So, with this built in trajectory toward a new canon. That would give authorized record of the life and teachings of Jesus. And the foundational teachings of his authoritative spokesman.

What remained for the early church to do. Was to discern which writings were the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the apostles. The rise of heretical teachings.

And the use of distorted books. Marcion, for example, around 140. Spurred the process of canonization.

How did the church do that? Before I say anymore. Something just came to my mind. When I heard it years and years ago from Dr. Goepfelt, my professor in Germany.

It was very, very significant. I'll just throw it out to you, see. You can store it away and use it when it comes in handy.

What you're going to see in a moment. Is that the closing and the final recognition of the New Testament canon. The 27 books that we have as a rule and authority and inspired and authoritative and inspired.

Was recognized in the first council in the fourth century. Three something, I'll see it in a minute. So, what's happening in the first three centuries with the authoritative books? And the answer is that they are exercising their authority as they prove themselves to be apostolic.

And the church is being governed by them. And the church is gradually recognizing which are and which aren't. And they are competing books.

And Dr. Goepfelt observed that the theology in many respects of the early church becomes purer after the formal recognition of the canon than it was before. For this very reason. Namely that the books and the authoritative canon was fully recognized and finished.

So that everybody was keying off the same group of documents instead of random choices. The reason that's significant is because there are a lot of people today that are urging us to go back to the pristine first two or three centuries. With the assumption the closer you are to Jesus in the books you read, the more accurate will be the theology.

And Professor Goepfelt is saying, no way. That does not follow. It may be true in any given case.

It just doesn't follow because the books were working their way into the life of the church gradually. And the church then finally said, these are they. These are the ones that have proved themselves over the last three centuries.

But in that process, you've got people all over the world saying off the wall things because they don't have the fullness of the canon with which to test their ideas. That's significant for you to think about. So when you hear somebody say, I think we should go back to the first and second and third centuries and read all that and follow that as our key for what's orthodox.

Well, maybe, maybe not. There may be insights there that you don't get anywhere else. But be careful you don't assume that that's the case.

It makes a lot of sense to me that once that canon is clearly unified and the one book that the whole church is now saying yes to would be a better foundation for a coherent, big church theology than the first three centuries. Here are the books. The reason for these books, I skipped it.

The main criterion for the books that were recognized as authoritative and canonical was apostolicity. Not just was it a book written by an apostle, but also was it written in the company of an apostle or presumably with his endorsement and approval. For example, here they are.

Matthew. These are just the authors now. Matthew, apostle.

Mark, Peter's interpreter and assistant. You have witnessed to that in papious writings. Luke, close associate and partner of Paul who wrote more of the New Testament than anybody.

That's why I named my first son Carsten Luke. Carsten because he was born in Germany. And Luke because Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else.

And I thought maybe he'll be a writer someday, which he is. You thought Paul wrote most of the New Testament. But Luke, Acts together are more of the New Testament than all of Paul.

So Luke is the dominant quantitative writer in the New Testament. And he, as you can see from the book of Acts, is traveling with Paul. Just to give you a little tidbit of what is speculation, but I think warranted.

Luke says Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. How does he know that? Inspiration, in my understanding, folds in all the means by which an author finds out true things. God doesn't have to dictate that Mary, Mary, I think Mary told him that.

I think he interviewed Mary. Because he's roaming around in Palestine for two years while Paul's in jail in the book of Acts at the end of his life. We know that because of the we sections in the book of Acts.

We went here and we went there. And so the we sections, you've got Luke arriving there with Paul. Only Paul gets slammed in jail for two years.

What's Luke doing all that time? Luke's not from Judea. He's a Gentile. He's going everywhere talking to people who knew Jesus.

I mean, what else would you do? Like if you had two years to spare, right in his home territory, and you hadn't grown up there? But the reason we say it's apostolic, even though he wasn't an apostle, is that he was right there with the apostle Paul. John was an apostle. Thirteen Epistles of Paul, he was an apostle.

Hebrews, we don't know who wrote Hebrews. But at the end it says, I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you.

Greet all the leaders. I only point that out to say, I don't know who the writer of the Hebrews was, but he was in the band around Paul and Timothy. Here.

Looks like. James, brother of Jesus, called an apostle probably in Galatians 119. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James.

Maybe it didn't mean, maybe it's not interpreted that way. Could be except James, doesn't have to mean he was an apostle, but it may mean that he was viewed as a kind of apostle. At any rate, very closely connected to the apostles, and then Peter, and then John.

Jude, the brother of James, and Revelation, John. Those are the books that we have in the New Testament, or the authors that we have. And the argument is that they are apostolic, even though they are not all apostles.

The most controversial books that took the longest to confirm themselves for the whole church were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, and Jude. There was no controversy about the others. But these, controversy swarmed around them.

But in the end, the church discerned their harmony with the others, and their antiquity and essential apostolicity. The core list, apart from the controverted books, was known at the latest in the latter part of the second century. Irenaeus mentions them, the list of 27 in 180, though not in any official way.

That came 367. The first list known to us with all 27 books is in the Festal Letter of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in AD 367. I misspoke when I said that all of them were listed in Irenaeus.

I forget just how many. Most of them were there. And here, the list was affirmed by the Synod of Hippo, then again in 393.

Now the question, when you look how late that date is, is did the church finally create this canon, or what? Dr. Folks Jackson expresses my view when he says, The church assuredly did not make the New Testament. The two grew up together. I'm going to distance myself, therefore, from the Roman Catholic understanding of authority here, the authority of the church, and go with F. F. Bruce and other Protestants.

F. F. Bruce puts it like this. What is particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any church council. When at last a church council, the Synod of Hippo in AD 393, listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.

Let me just try to say this gently. One of the things that separates Protestants and Roman Catholics is the way you think about authority of the Bible in relationship to the church. Protestants like to say that the Bible created the church, and Catholics tend to say the church created or confirmed the Bible.

In other words, the Bible has its authority because the church councils gave it. And thus align church authority, Pope especially, the office that he holds, and Bible are together in the Roman Catholic Church, and Protestants order it like this, Bible and church. And that's where I am, and I think that's what happened, that the Bible pressed itself upon the church, and the church didn't create a canon, it recognized a canon.

So what is the canon? Five books of narrative, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, letters, 21 of them, and then the Book of Visions, the Revelation, and that's what makes up our Bible. So that's how the Bible came to be, and why I believe what we have as the Bible is what we should have as the Bible. No books are missing that should be in it, and no books are in it that shouldn't be there.

I have a list here of books on the canon, which I don't expect you to write down now, but if you want to look at them later, you can, Metzger, Bruce, Harris, Warfield, Geisler, there are many books, and you can, it's amazing what you can do on the internet these days, you just need to be discerning what you find and do with it, but amazing information is there. Step three, do we have the very words written by the biblical authors? Because if you say these are the right books, but in fact they've been so distorted by transmission that you can't trust them, then it doesn't really matter that you have the right books, because you've lost what was in them anyway, which is what some people are saying today. Do we have any of the original manuscripts? I'll try to move through this quickly, this is pretty technical stuff, and it would be easy, and in a sense it would be fun to sink down into it, but I don't think the payoff is as big here as some other things that we could talk about, so let me try to move quickly.

Do we have any of the original manuscripts? No, we don't. We do not have any of the actual piece of paper or papyrus or parchment that a biblical writer actually wrote on. How were the manuscripts of the

New Testament preserved? The first printed Greek New Testament was in 1516 by Erasmus.

Before that, everything was transmitted by copying by hand, and we owe our Bible to the meticulous love and care given by countless monks and scholars for the first 1,500 years of the church era. How many manuscripts are there? When I prepared this several years ago, actually I quoted from 1967 statistics because that's the book I studied textual criticism in, but I just saw online today at Justin Taylor's blog, reading an article by Dan Wallace, that he said today 5,700 manuscript fragments of the New Testament in the original Greek. 1967, the statistics were these musical text, lectionary portions, papyri, but you don't need to know that.

How does this amount of evidence compare with other ancient writings of the same era? We have no original manuscripts of any other writers from this period of history. It's phenomenal that the New Testament so outshines all others just in terms of quantity. I could give you examples here.

Caesar's Gallic Wars, 10 manuscripts available, parts of Roman history, Livy, 20 manuscripts, the histories and annals of Tacitus, 2 manuscripts, history of Thucydides, 8 manuscripts, compared to 5,000 fragments of manuscripts for the New Testament. It's simply astonishing. It creates problems, but it creates amazing potential as well.

Does this small number of manuscripts cause secular scholars to despair that we can know what these writers wrote, the ones I just listed? If Bruce says no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works, which are of any use to us, are over 1,300 years later than the originals, whereas New Testament go back to the 2nd century, some of them. So are you saying that the New Testament is unique in having so many manuscripts? Yes. No other ancient book comes close to this kind of wealth of diverse preservation.

What are some of these oldest manuscripts? The oldest is a papyrus. It comes from about AD 130. I just confirmed that again today.

Some date it as into the 1st century and some later, like this, and contains John 18, 31 to 33 and 37 following. It's a little old fragment and you can see it on both sides. The only full early manuscript of the New Testament comes from AD 350 called the Codex Sinaiticus because it was discovered in the monastery on Mount Sinai.

So are the manuscripts the only source of our knowledge of the original wording of the New Testament writings? No. In addition to manuscripts, there are quotations from the New Testament in very early writers outside the New Testament. For example, in the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas and Clement's letter to the Corinthians were produced around AD 100 and quote extensively from the New Testament.

So you can compare what they quoted and what's actually there in the Greek manuscripts. The letters of Polycarp and Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch around AD 120 contain many quotes from the Gospels and the letters of Paul. Do all these manuscripts create problems or solutions for getting back to the original writings? The huge number of manuscripts of the New Testament result in two things.

One, there are many variations in wording among them because they were all copied by hand and subject to human error. There are so many manuscripts that these errors tend to be self-correcting by the many manuscript witnesses we have to compare. Here's what F. F. Bruce says.

Fortunately, if the great number of manuscripts increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionally the means of correcting such errors so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared. It is in truth remarkably small. Is there a branch of biblical studies that focuses on this problem of getting back to the wording of the original writings? Yes, the branch of biblical studies that works with all these sources to determine the best manuscript is textual criticism.

And I thank God that there are text critics who do that work for us. When I was in Germany, just to give you a flavor for this, when I was in Germany, 1971 to 1974, doing my dissertation on Love Your Enemies, Jesus' love command in the early Christian ethical teaching and in the synoptics, I was so nervous. I was just, could I do this? I felt like I'd gotten into this program under false pretenses because they didn't look at any of my papers or any of my grades.

They just said, come, because Dr. Ladd recommended me. I thought, this is crazy. They should test me and see if I can do this.

And so here I am. I don't speak German well enough. I've been there about nine months, been studying like crazy.

And Dr. Gobbelt assigns me a topic and I say, looks great, I'll do it. And he says, you'll present to the seminar on, and gave me the date, about two months out. So that means a group of six people, all speaking German, sitting in his living room with glasses of wine sitting in front of them.

Because we're in Germany, right? And he said, you can write in English, not a problem. You can present in English, but the discussion will be in German. So, what do I do? What would you do on your first paper that you're going to present as part of your dissertation on a paragraph of Jesus' teaching on Love Your Enemies? Matthew 5, 43 to 48.

I spent the whole time on text criticism. I'm going to be scholarly, right? I'm going to prove these are the very words that Matthew wrote. I've got to have a text that I can count on.

So I worked my pants off to show, with all the manuscript evidence, that this is... So I got there, and I presented my paper. I read it. It was really complicated.

And none of them were native English speakers, and so I'm sure it taxed them to the limit. And when I was done, Professor Goepelt was over there. And he said, Herr Pieper... That's what he called me, Herr Pieper.

Herr Pieper, wir brauchen das nicht zu machen. We don't need to do this. The text critics have done this.

We don't need to do this anymore. That work is finished. Okay.

I'll just take what's in the Nestle-alot text and go with it. It was a lesson for me how the entire radical, critical German scene believes that the text-critical work has been done, and it's been done well. In other words, the documents that we have in front of us in our Greek New Testament are considered to be valid by the most liberal German scholars.

Now, let me show you what I mean when I say that, just so you don't over-interpret it. It's out of order here, I think. F. J. A. Hort, the proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands as raised above doubt is great.

Let me get the picture for you here, because I might have lost some of you. You got 5,700 fragments with a few whole manuscripts of Greek texts of the New Testament. Text critics compare John 1830 in one to John 1830 in another, and they see, oh, here we have a plural and here we have a singular, or here we have a sigma at the end and here we don't have a sigma at the end, or here we have one word, and so they're not the same.

So, okay, which is original? And if you just had two, you'd be hard put. You might say the oldest, or you might say the reading is the hardest, and so that's probably original. You got these criteria, but when you have 5,700, the evidences of what's original starts to mount up with greater, the variations increase, but so do the evidences for why you can assume one and not the other.

And this is talking about how many of these variations are up for grabs. The proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands has been raised above doubt, as is great, not less than a rough computation, seven-eighths of the whole. The remaining one-eighth, formed in great part by changes of order and other comparative trivialities, constitutes the whole area of textual criticism.

The words, in our opinion, still subject to doubt, only make up about one-sixtieth of the whole New Testament. Substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text. If Bruce puts it this way, the variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.

In other words, the remaining uncertainties of any significant uncertainty don't affect the substance of what the New Testament is teaching. Now, that's being challenged today by Bart Ehrman and others, but I think most scholars would still say that is, in fact, the case. Does it matter... Why do we say... Some people bring this up, and so let me just address it briefly.

Does the doctrine of inerrancy in the original manuscripts matter? Our affirmation of faith says we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, which we don't have. So people scoff at that. They say, we don't even have it.

What good is it to affirm the infallibility of it? I think it matters. This is my effort to say why. Yes, it matters because it affirms the reality of objective historical inspiration.

There is an objective measuring rod for us to return to, to the degree that we come close to the wording of the original, we come close to the very words of God. We are there for all practical purposes. So I think it does matter to say that the Bible is inspired and inerrant in the original manuscripts.

Let me pray, and I'll let you go. We'll be here at nine in the morning. We'll have three hours together.

We'll take a break in the middle, and we'll see how far we can get. Father in heaven, thank you so much for your help tonight and for your Word. I pray that you would draw near now to these brothers and sisters and give them good rest and bring them back refreshed in the morning for the far more important work we have to do tomorrow as to why we believe these books now that are here with a textually critical, warranted text, why we believe it's true, reflects reality, and we can stake our lives on it.

So help us be ready for that, I pray, and lead us into it. In Jesus' name I ask. Amen.

Thank you. Good night.

Video: https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/EfBpn_fwYfY.mp4
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/why-we-believe-the-bible/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net