

– *Reformation Today Series* –

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?



JOHN PIPER

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IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

1. Does God Exist?

Whole books have been written on why the Bible is trustworthy.¹ But for the sake of our own sense of integrity, we ought to review in a brief space why we bank our hope on the message of this book. I hope I can steer a course between unsupported dogmatism² on the one hand and apologetic³ overkill on the other.

Let's start at the most basic level of religious faith. I believe in God. There may be social and family reasons for how I got to be this way, just as there are social and family reasons for why you are the way you are. But when I try to be reasonable and test my inherited belief in God, I cannot escape His reality.

Suppose I try to go back a million billion trillion years to imagine the nature of original reality. What was it like? What I see is the stunning fact that there is a fifty-fifty possibility that original reality was a Person rather than a gas. Just think of it. Since whatever originally was has always existed, there are absolutely no causes which could have disposed that original reality to be a gas rather than a Person. Every reasonable person must admit that it is a tossup. Maybe some undefined stuff existed from eternity—or maybe it was a Person!

Admitting the reasonable possibility that ultimate reality could be personal has a way of freeing you to consider subsequent evidence more openly. My own inescapable inference from the order of the universe and the existence of human personhood and the universal sense of conscience (moral self-judgment) and the universal judicial sentiment (judgment of others who dishonor us)—my own inference from all this is that ultimate reality is not impersonal, but is indeed a Person. I simply find it impossible to believe that the human drama of the centuries, with its quest for meaning and beauty and truth, has no deeper root than molecular mutations.

¹ For example, B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1959); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943); J. Norval Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953); J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1958); Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957); J. B. Phillips, *The Ring of Truth* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967); John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Tyndale Press, 1972); James Boice, ed., *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983).

² **dogmatism** – the tendency to express strongly held opinions in a way that suggests they should be accepted without question.

³ **apologetic** – from the Greek *apologia*, apologetics is the branch of theology which makes a defense of the faith.

So when I consider where enduring happiness is to be found, I am driven to search for it in relation to God—the personal Creator of all things. Nothing seems more reasonable to me than that lasting happiness will never be found by a person who ignores or opposes his Creator. I am constantly astonished at people who say they believe in God but live as though happiness were to be found by giving Him two percent of their attention. Surely the end of the ages will reveal this to be absurd.

2. Who Is Jesus Christ?

But once we begin to seek our happiness in relation to God, we are confronted with many different claims and religions. Why should we bank our hope on the claim that the Christian Bible is a true revelation of God? My basic answer is that Jesus Christ—the center and sum of the Bible—has won my confidence by His authenticity and love and power. I see His authenticity and love in the record of His words and deeds, and I see His power especially in His resurrection from the dead.

A. Listening to the Witnesses to Christ

You need not believe the Bible is infallible to discover that it presents a historical Person of incomparable qualities. On the contrary, the reasonable way to approach the Bible for the first time is to listen openly and honestly to its various witnesses to Christ, to see if these witnesses and this Person authenticate themselves. If they do, the things they and Christ say about the Bible itself will take on new authority—and you may well end up accepting the whole Bible (as I do!) as God’s inspired, infallible Word. But you don’t need to start there.

The incomparable Christ

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by the self-authenticating message of Christ and His witnesses. The biblical accounts present Jesus as a man of incomparable love for God and man. He became angry when God was dishonored by irreligion (Mar 11:15-17) and when man was destroyed by religion (Mar 3:4-5). He taught us to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry for righteousness, pure in heart, merciful, and peaceable (Mat 5:3-9). He urged us to honor God from the heart (Mat 15:8) and to put away all hypocrisy (Luk 12:1). And He practiced what He preached. His life was summed up as “doing good and healing” (Act 10:38).

He took time for little children and blessed them (Mar 10:13-16). He crossed social barriers to help women (Joh 4), foreigners (Mar 7:24-30), lepers (Luk 17:11-19), harlots (Luk 7:36-50), tax collectors (Mat 9:9-13), and beggars (Mar 10:46-52). He washed his disciples’ feet like a slave and taught them to serve rather than be served (Joh 13:1-17). Even when He was exhausted His heart went out in compassion to the pressing crowds (Mar 6:31-34). Even when His own disciples were fickle and ready to deny Him and forsake Him, He wanted to be with them (Luk 22:15) and He prayed for them (Luk 22:32). He said His life was a ransom for many (Mar 10:45), and as He was being executed at age thirty-three, He prayed for the forgiveness of His murderers (Luk 23:3-4).

Not only is Jesus portrayed as full of love for God and man, He is also presented as utterly truthful and authentic. He did not act on His own authority to gain worldly praise. He directed men to His Father in heaven. “He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him” (Joh 7:18). He does not have the spirit of an egomaniac⁴ or a charlatan.⁵ He seems utterly at peace with Himself and God. He is authentic.

This is evident in the way He saw through people’s shams (Mat 22:18). He was so pure and so perceptive that He could not be tripped up or cornered in debate (Mat 22:15-22). He was amazingly unsentimental in His demands, even toward those for whom He had a special affection (Mar 10:21). He never softened the message of righteousness to increase His following or curry favor.⁶ Even His opponents were stunned by His indifference to human praise: “Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth” (Mar 12:14). He never had to back down from a claim, and could be convicted of no wrong (Joh 8:46). He was meek and lowly in heart (Mat 11:29).

But what made all this so amazing was the unobtrusive yet unmistakable authority that rang through all He did and said. The officers of the Pharisees speak for all of us when they say, “Never man spake like this man” (Joh 7:46). There was something unmistakably different about Him: “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mat 7:29).

His claims were not the open declaration of worldly power that the Jews expected from the Messiah. But they were unmistakable nonetheless. Though no one understood it at the time, there was no doubt that He had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Joh 2:19, Mat 26:61). They thought it was an absurd claim that He would single-handedly rebuild an edifice that had been forty-six years in the making. But He was claiming in His typically veiled way that He would rise from the dead—and by His own power.

In His last debate with the Pharisees (Mat 22:41-45), Jesus silenced them with this question: “What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?” They answered, “The Son of David.” In response, Jesus quoted David from Psalm 110:1—“The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.” Then, with only slightly veiled authority, Jesus asked, “If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?” In other words, for those who have eyes to see, the son of David and far more than the son is here. “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here” (Mat 12:41-42). This kind of veiled claim runs through all Jesus said and did.

⁴ **egomaniac** – one who has an obsessive preoccupation with the self.

⁵ **charlatan** – a fraud; one who makes elaborate, fraudulent claims.

⁶ **curry favor** – to seek favor by flattery.

Besides that, He commanded evil spirits and they obeyed Him (Mar 1:27). He issued forgiveness for sins (Mar 2:5). He summoned people to leave all and follow Him to have eternal life and treasure in heaven (Mar 10:17-22; Luk 14:26-33). And He made the astonishing claim that “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” (Mat 10:32-33).

Am I arguing in a circle?

Perhaps someone will say I am arguing in a circle. Am I not assuming the reliability of the biblical portrait of Jesus, even as I argue for it? Not exactly. The portrait I have sketched is not isolated to one writer, nor (as critical scholars would say) to any particular layer of the tradition. No matter how far back you go through a critical study of the Gospels, you never find a Jesus of history substantially different than the one described here. In other words, you don’t have to assume the accounts are reliable. You can assume they are not if you wish. But the more rigorously you analyze them with a fair historical procedure, the more you realize there is no point between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Gospels where this unequaled man was created by human artifice.⁷

In other words, I am not starting with the assumption that the Gospels are inspired or infallible. I am trying to show that a certain portrait of Jesus is common to all the witnesses, and goes back as far as historical criticism can go.

How do you account for Jesus?

How is this concert⁸ and this antiquity to be explained? Did some unknown creative genius take an ordinary man, Jesus, and invent His deeds of power and His words of love and authority and authenticity, then present this invented Jesus to a church with such deceptive power that many people were willing from the outset to die for this fictional Christ? Further, must we believe that all the Gospel writers swallowed the invention—and in the space of several decades while many who knew the real Jesus were still living? Is that a more reasonable or well-founded guess than the plain assertion that a real man, Jesus Christ, did in fact say and do the sorts of things the biblical witnesses said He did?

You must decide for yourself. To my mind, an unknown inventor of this Jesus is more incredible than the possibility of Jesus’ reality. So for me the question becomes, How do we account for a man who leaves a legacy like this?

I cannot morally reckon Him among the poor deluded souls who suffer from pathological⁹ illusions of grandeur. Nor can I reckon Him among the great con men of history, a deceiver who planned and orchestrated *a worldwide movement of mission on the basis of a hoax*. *Instead I am constrained to acknowledge His truth. Both my mind and my heart find themselves drawn to yield allegiance to this Man. He has won my confidence.*

⁷ **artifice** – cleverness or skill.

⁸ **concert** – mutual agreement.

⁹ **pathological** – habitual, compulsive.

B. The Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection from the Dead

Alongside this line of evidence we should put the evidence for Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If He did not rise but followed the way of all flesh, the extraordinary implications of His Word and life come to nothing. But if He overcame death, His claims and His character are vindicated.¹⁰ And His teaching concerning the Bible becomes our standard. Without going into detail, I will mention six things that undergird my confidence in the resurrection of Jesus.

1. Jesus bore witness to His own coming resurrection.

Two separate witnesses testify in two very different ways to Jesus' statement during His lifetime that if His enemies destroyed the temple, He would build it again in three days (Joh 2:19; Mar 14:58; cf. Mat 26:61). Jesus also spoke illusively of the "sign of the prophet Jonas"—three days in the heart of the earth (Mat 12:39-40; 16:4). Therefore, the credibility of Jesus points to the reality of the resurrection to come. And He hinted at it again in Matthew 21:42—"The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner."

2. The tomb was empty on the third day.

The tomb was empty on the third day. There are four possible ways to account for this:

His foes stole the body. If they did (and they never claimed to have done so), they surely would have produced the body to stop the successful spread of the Christian faith in the very city where the crucifixion occurred. But they could not produce it.

His friends stole it. This was an early rumor (Mat 28:11-15). Is it probable? Could they have overcome the guards at the tomb? More important, would they have begun to preach with such authority that Jesus was raised, knowing He was not? Would they have risked their lives and accepted beatings for something they knew was a fraud?

Jesus was not dead, but only unconscious when they laid Him in the tomb. He awoke, removed the stone, overcame the soldiers, and vanished from history after a few meetings with His disciples in which He convinced them He was risen from the dead. Even the foes of Jesus did not try this line. He was obviously dead. The stone could not be moved by one man from within who had just spent six hours nailed to a cross and been stabbed in the side by a spear.

God raised Jesus from the dead. This is what He said would happen. It is what the disciples said did happen.

But as long as there is a remote possibility of explaining the resurrection naturalistically, modern people say we should not jump to a supernatural explanation. Is this reasonable? I don't think so. Of course, we don't want to be gullible. But neither do we want to reject the truth just because it's strange. We need to be aware that our commitments at this point are much affected by our preferences—either for the state of affairs that would arise from the truth of the resurrection, or for the state of affairs that would arise

¹⁰ **vindicated** – to clear from criticism; to uphold by evidence.

from the falsehood of the resurrection. If the message of Jesus has opened you to the reality of God and the need of forgiveness, for example, then anti-supernatural dogma¹¹ might lose its power over your mind. Could it be that this openness is *not* prejudice for the resurrection, but freedom from prejudice against it?

3. The disciples were transformed.

The disciples were almost immediately transformed from men who were hopeless and fearful after the crucifixion (Luk 24:21; Joh 20:19) into men who were confident and bold witnesses of the resurrection (Act 2:24; 3:15; 4:2). Their explanation was that they had seen the risen Christ and had been authorized to be His witnesses (Act 2:32). The most popular competing explanation is that their confidence was owing to hallucinations. There are numerous problems with such a notion:

For one, hallucinations are generally private things, but Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that Jesus “was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present.” They were available to query.

Furthermore, the disciples were not gullible, but level-headed skeptics both before and after the resurrection (Mar 9:32; Luk 24:11; Joh 20:19, 25).

Moreover, is the deep and noble teaching of those who witnessed the risen Christ the stuff of which hallucinations are made? What about Paul’s great letter to the Romans?

4. The early church supports the truth.

The sheer existence of a thriving, empire-conquering early Christian church supports the truth of the resurrection claim. The church spread on the power of the testimony that Jesus was raised from the dead and that God had thus made Him both Lord and Christ (Act 2:36). The Lordship of Christ over all nations is based on His victory over death. This is the message that spread all over the world. Its power to cross cultures and create one new people of God was strong testimony of its truth.

5. Paul’s conversion supports the truth.

The apostle Paul’s conversion supports the truth of the resurrection. He argues to a partially unsympathetic audience in Galatians 1:11-17 that his gospel comes from the living Jesus Christ. His argument is that before his Damascus road experience, he was utterly opposed to the Christian faith. But now, to everyone’s astonishment, he is risking his life for the gospel. His explanation: The risen Jesus appeared to him and authorized him to spearhead the Gentile mission (Act 26:15-18). Can we credit such a testimony?

This leads to my last argument for the resurrection.

6. Witnesses are not duped or deceived.

The New Testament witnesses do not bear the stamp of dupes¹² or deceivers. How do you credit a witness? How do you decide whether to believe a person’s testimony? The decision to give credence¹³ to a person’s testimony is not the same as completing a

¹¹ **dogma** – an authoritative principle; a statement of ideas or opinions.

¹² **dupes** – easily deceived persons.

¹³ **credence** – acceptance.

mathematical equation. The certainty is of a different kind, yet can be just as firm (for example, I trust my wife's testimony that she is faithful).

When a witness is dead, we can base our judgment of him only on the content of his writings and the testimonies of others about him. How do Peter and John and Matthew and Paul stack up?

In my judgment (and at this point we can live authentically only by our own judgment—Luke 12:57), these men's writings do not read like the works of gullible, easily deceived or deceiving men. Their insights into human nature are profound. Their personal commitment is sober and carefully stated. Their teachings are coherent and do not look like the invention of unstable men. The moral and spiritual standard is high. And the life of these men, as it comes through their writings, is totally devoted to the truth and to the honor of God.

These, then, are some (not all!) of the evidences that undergird my confidence in Jesus as the true revelation of God. Before I try to explain how this leads me to credit the whole Bible as God's Word, let me give a personal admonition.¹⁴

An important admonition

Whenever a Christian converses with a non-Christian about the truth of the faith, every request of the non-Christian for the proof of Christianity should be met with an equally serious request for proof for the non-Christian's philosophy of life. Otherwise we get the false impression that the Christian worldview is tentative and uncertain, while the more secular worldviews are secure and sure, standing above the need to give a philosophical and historical accounting of themselves. But that is not the case.

Many people who demand that Christians produce proof of our claims do not make the same demand upon themselves. Secular skepticism¹⁵ is assumed to be reasonable because it is widespread, not because it is well argued. We should simply insist that the controversy be conducted with fairness. If the Christian must produce proof, so must others.

3. How This Relates to the Bible

Now, if Jesus has won our confidence by His authentic love and His power over death, then His view of things will be our standard. What was His view of the Old Testament?

A. What Was Jesus' View of the Old Testament?

First of all, was the Old Testament He prized made up of the same books as the Old Testament that Protestants prize today? Or did it include others (like the Old Testament Apocrypha?)¹⁶ In other words, was Jesus' Bible the Hebrew Old Testament, limited to the

¹⁴ **admonition** – cautionary advice or warning.

¹⁵ **skepticism** – the thought that absolute knowledge is impossible.

¹⁶ The Apocrypha is a group of ancient books written during the time between the Old and New Testaments. They are included in Catholic editions of the Old Testament, but Protestants have generally rejected them as part of the authoritative inspired canon of Scripture. For the texts, see *The Oxford*

thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament, or was His Bible more like the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint¹⁷) which includes an extra fifteen books? Norman Anderson, in his inspiring book *God's Word for God's World*, states my answer and the support for it so well that I would like simply to quote him:

So we must now consider the reciprocal¹⁸ witness; that Jesus bore to the Bible—primarily, of course, to the Old Testament, as the only part of the Scriptures that was then in existence. That the books He had in mind spanned the whole “Hebrew Bible” is, I think, clear from two New Testament references: first, from His allusion in Luke 24:44 to “law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms,” since this was tantamount to referring to the threefold structure of the Jewish Scriptures as the “Law,” the “Prophets,” and the “Writings” (in which the Psalms held pride of place); and, secondly, from His allusion to “all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias,” since the blood of Abel is mentioned early in Genesis (4:8), the first book in the Hebrew Bible, and that of Zechariah towards the end of 2 Chronicles (24:21), the last book in the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁹

If, then, Jesus’ Bible was the same Old Testament we Protestants use today, the question now becomes, How did He regard it?

1. In quoting Psalm 110:1, He said that David spoke by the Holy Spirit: “David himself said by the Holy Ghost...” (Mar 12:36).

2. In His controversy with the Pharisees concerning their interpretation of the Old Testament, He contrasted the tradition of the elders and the commandment of God found in Scripture: “Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition!” (Mar 7:9).

3. When He answered the Pharisees concerning the problem of divorce, He referred to Genesis 2:24 as something “said” by God, though these are words of the biblical narrator and not a direct quote of God: “he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother ” (Mat 19:4-5).

4. He makes an explicit statement concerning infallibility in John 10:35—“the scriptures cannot be broken.”

5. An implicit claim for the inerrancy of the Old Testament is made in Matthew 22:29: “Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. ” Knowing the Scriptures keeps one from erring.

Annotated Apocrypha of the Old Testament, ed. Bruce Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ **Septuagint** – translation of the Old Testament scriptures into Greek, begun in the third century B.C.

¹⁸ **reciprocal** – given by each of two sides, i.e., Jesus bore witness to the Scriptures, and the Scriptures bore witness to Him.

¹⁹ Norman Anderson, *God's Word for God's World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p. 112. The Jewish Scriptures include all our Old Testament but in a different order.

6. Repeatedly Jesus treats the Old Testament as an authority that must be fulfilled. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle²⁰ shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (Mat 5:17-18; see Mat 26:54, 56; Luk 16:17).

7. Jesus rebuked the two disciples on the Emmaus road for being “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luk 24:25).

8. Jesus Himself used the Old Testament as an authoritative weapon against the temptations of Satan: “But he answered and said, It is written...” (Mat 4:4, 7, 10).

The diversity of this witness and its spread over all the Gospel material show that the Lord Jesus regarded the Old Testament as a trustworthy, authoritative, unerring guide in our quest for enduring happiness. Therefore we who submit to the authority of Christ will also want to submit to the authority of the book He esteemed so highly.

B. The Authority of the New Testament

Now what about the New Testament? It would be possible to develop a long historical argument for the inspiration and infallibility of books of the New Testament, but that would expand this article beyond appropriate bounds.²¹ So I will give pointers that can undergird our confidence in the New Testament as being equally authoritative and reliable as the Old.

My confidence in the New Testament as God’s Word rests on a group of observations.

1. Jesus chose twelve apostles to be His authoritative representatives in founding the church. At the end of His life He promised them, “the Holy Ghost... shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (Joh 14:26; 16:13).

2. The apostle Paul, whose stunning conversion from a life of murdering Christians to making Christians, demands special explanation. He says he (and the other apostles) were commissioned by the risen Christ to preach “not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth” (1Co 2:13). In other words, Christ’s prediction in John 14:26 was being fulfilled through this inspiration.

3. Peter confirms this in 2 Peter 3:16, putting Paul’s writings in the same category with the inspired Old Testament writings (2Pe 1:21).

4. All the New Testament writings come from those earliest days of promised special revelation and were written by the apostles and their close associates.

5. The message of these books has the “ring of truth.”²² It makes sense out of so much reality. The message on the one hand of God’s holiness and our guilt, and on the

²⁰ **jot...tittle** – respectively, the smallest letter (jot) and the smallest part of a letter (tittle) in the Hebrew alphabet; used as a metaphor for “not even the least things will pass away.”

²¹ For pursuing such a study, I recommend John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Tyndale, 1972).

²² After translating the Gospels into “modern English,” J. B. Phillips wrote the following in *The Ring of Truth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), pp. 57-58: “I felt, and feel, without any shadow of

other hand of Christ's death and resurrection as our only hope—this message fits the reality we see and the hope we long for and don't see.

6. Finally, as the Catechism says, "The Bible evidences itself to be God's Word by the heavenliness of its doctrine, the unity of its parts, and its power to convert sinners and edify saints."²³

Appendix: Formulation of the Canon of Scripture

This appendix is abstracted from A Glorious Institution: The Church in History, by Dr. Stanford Murrell, as further explanation to the development of the canon of Scripture. It is available as a paperback book from Chapel Library.

The Old Testament Canon²⁴

The early Church trusted the Apostles' doctrine because they knew it was grounded in the teachings of the Old Testament, which was believed to be inspired by God (2 Ti 3:16). While the Jewish and Christian communities did not embrace the idea that God inspired all men and all writings, there was selected material that was held to be unique. Ezra is credited with gathering the many Old Testament writings into the approximate collection we have today.

The Hebrew people recognized it as being the authoritative voice of God. They promised to obey all that had been written and rehearsed in their hearing (Exo 24:3-8), because they received it as the Word of God through Moses (Deu 31:24-26). In 625 B.C., when repairs were being made on the temple in Jerusalem, a scroll containing the Law of God was discovered. King Josiah had it read before all the people, which led to a time of spiritual renewal (2Ki 22-23). The message of Micah (Mic 3:9-12) caused King Hezekiah to repent (Jer 26:17-19).

Judas Maccabeus²⁵ and his associates (c. 164 B.C.) divided the canonical books into three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (the Psalms and Proverbs). It was this division and this canon of the Old Testament which was accepted by both the

doubt, that close contact with the text of the Gospels builds up in the heart and mind a character of awe-inspiring stature and quality. I have read, in Greek and Latin, scores of myths, but I did not find the slightest flavor of myth here. There is no hysteria, no careful working for effect and no attempt at collusion. These are not embroidered tales: the material is cut to the bone. One sensed again and again that understatement which we have been taught to think is more "British" than Oriental.

There is an almost childlike candor and simplicity, and the total effect is tremendous. No man could ever have invented such a character as Jesus. No man could have set down such artless and vulnerable accounts as these unless some real event lay behind them."

²³ The Baptist Catechism, commonly called *Keach's Catechism*, or *Spurgeon's Catechism*. Available as a small booklet, *A Catechism with Proofs*, from Chapel Library.

²⁴ **canon** – from the Greek *kanon*, which meant "measuring stick," then "rule or standard," and finally a "list written in a column." In this sense it was applied to the list of books which the churches acknowledged to be inspired and authoritative for the faith and life of a Christian.

²⁵ **Judas Maccabeus** – leader of the Jewish revolt against the religious persecutions of the king of Syria, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He defended the rights and traditions of the Jews in the 2nd century B.C.

rabbis of the day and by Jesus (Luk 24:44), and which the early Church embraced. By the end of the first century A.D., Bishop Melito of Sardis (in modern Turkey) listed these thirty-nine books as being canonical (inspired and given by God).

The New Testament Canon

While the Old Testament had taken many years to formulate, the New Testament Scriptures were written within one hundred years of each other. However, like the Old Testament canon, it would take time until the multitude of various writings (Luk 1:1) could be duly considered by Church leaders and a canon carefully formulated.

There were good reasons why the Church wanted to settle upon an official body of Scripture. First, there was the matter of persecution. Soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven (Act 1:9-11), physical acts of hostility were inflicted upon the saints. Initially, the Jewish community was responsible for the ill treatment of believers in Christ as the true Messiah (Act 8). Later, the Roman government officially attacked the people of God (Jam 1:1; Rev 13:1-7). If Christians were called upon to suffer for their faith, they would do so (1Pe 2:21). But there was no need to suffer needlessly for non-canonical books, which were found to be offensive only to religious and civil authorities. Those other writings gladly could be given up or destroyed.

Second, there was the matter of heresy. Some of the enemies of the Gospel were brazen²⁶ enough to tell those in the Christian community which books in their possession were inspired of God and which were not. These heretics tried to set the Scriptural boundaries for the Church! One such bold enemy of Christ was a man named Marcion. In about A.D. 140, Marcion arrived in Rome to spread his heretical ideas about God and Christ. He denied the physical resurrection of Christ and the Jewish heritage of the Church. Therefore, he excluded the early apostolic writings which placed great emphasis upon the doctrine of the resurrection and the deity of Christ. Such teachings forced the Church to consider more formally which books should make up the New Testament.

Writing in the early part of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea²⁷ listed almost all of our New Testament books as inspired by God and therefore authoritative. By the middle of the fourth century, the Codex Vaticanus, a Greek volume of both Old and New Testaments, listed the complete New Testament as it is known today. And in A.D. 367 in his annual Easter Festal²⁸ Letter, Athanasius,²⁹ Bishop of Alexandria, explained what the Old Testament and the New Testament canon of Scripture should be to all the churches within his sphere of authority. Jerome,³⁰ in a letter written in 414, accepted the New Testament books listed by Athanasius.

²⁶ **brazen** – expressing boldness and a complete lack of shame.

²⁷ **Eusebius of Caesarea** (ca. A.D. 260-339) – Christian historian, Biblical scholar, theologian, famous for writing his *Ecclesiastical History*.

²⁸ **festal** – relating to a feast or festival.

²⁹ **Athanasius** (ca. A.D. 293-373) – theologian, church statesman, who was the chief defender of Christ's deity in the 4th century.

³⁰ **Jerome** (ca. A.D. 327-419/420) – Biblical translator, known particularly for his Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate.

A key in understanding the formation of the New Testament canon is that it was never an arbitrary choice based on the decisions of men. Four criteria were used powerfully by the Holy Spirit among widely dispersed groups to bring unity in the formation of the canon. Scholars of the time considered that inspired books should have:

1. authors who had been in direct contact with Christ or the Apostles;
2. consistency in doctrine;
3. wide acceptance and use by churches in all regions, under the guidance of the Spirit
4. produced dynamic changes in lives, as used by the Spirit.

The New Testament canon meets these criteria in a unique and special way. It truly has been formulated by the hand of God!

In the providence of God, since the days of Jerome, the twenty-seven books which make up the New Testament have been confirmed by the Church. Spiritual healing has come by the Holy Spirit to those who read the sacred words. Worthy men have debated and defended these particular books of the Bible against unworthy opponents (Jude 4). God has been faithful to give to His people a particular body of truth (Jude 3). Fundamental to Christian faith is the fact that we have a God-breathed book without error, the Bible.

