Section: Doctrine of the Word of God (Bibliology)

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q24. Can we trust the Bible?**

Yes. The Bible is completely true and without error in its original manuscripts.

* **Intro**

Good evening and welcome. For those of you who are new or visiting, my name is Steven Obert and I am the youth director here at Disciples Church. It is my privilege to get to teach tonight’s catechism Q&A. There have been many things that I’ve truly enjoyed learning and understanding better since God graciously caused me to take His word serious and begin truly studying and knowing Him in and through it. One of these areas is the transmission and preservation of scripture. Part of this is because of my joy in understanding apologetics. When you are giving a defense of your faith it is very helpful for you to know the history and understand the details about how we have the bible. The Scriptures are truly foundational for the Christian. Because of this, they become the very point of argument from those who are unwilling to bow their knee to Christ Jesus as Lord. One of the pastors and leading apologists that I truly enjoy learning from is Dr. James White. Much of what I’ve taught on the last two weeks and this week are things that I’ve learned from Dr. White’s teaching and my time in the word.

Tonight we are going to learn about textual variances. I’ll define textual variances in a moment, but perhaps some context first would help the definition make more sense. Due to the nature of the transmission of scripture (scripture being copied and passed along to be copied) we have over the years collected many handwritten manuscripts from all sorts of geographical locations. Up until the 1800’s the scriptures were still being primarily copied by hand. Well many historians have fought well to collect these handwritten manuscripts, some dating all the way back to the second century (within 100 years of Christ’s actual life). Because genuine Christians have always sought to know the truth, we have taken these various manuscripts and done the very hard work of comparing them to see whether or not we have differences between them. With our technological advances, we are still doing this work today. When we find a difference between manuscripts we call these differences a textual variant. A textual variant is any place among the manuscripts in which there is variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling or punctuation differences.

When we declare that we can trust the bible, that it is “Completely true and without error in its original manuscripts,” we need to bring clarity to what we mean. The scriptures that you and I have are obviously not the original manuscripts, they are not the actual letters that the original writers penned. To this date we do not have a copy of the original manuscripts, however I really think it would be pretty amazing to find one eventually. Although I think even if one was found, it would be pretty hard to verify that it was “The” original. What we do know though is that through the transmission process of the scriptures that we hold in our hand, we can be very confident that what the original writers and therefore God intended for us to have, we most certainly have. What we are going to study and understand tonight will be very helpful again in the defense of our faith and your confidence in the word of God.

The reason we are doing this work and teaching on the doctrine of Scripture is because it such a vital part of the Christian life. Without God’s revelation of truth no one could be saved or know His commanded will. Jesus prayed for this very thing prior to His crucifixion on behalf of the elect.

**John 17:14-19** **14I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.**

As long as we are here in this world, living as Christians we must hold to the word of God. Jesus said there, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” If we don’t have Scripture, how are we to know the truth that God expressed in Scripture? The word of God is our only ultimate source of truth. Without it we have no objective standard or revelation with which to justify our beliefs or the world around us. This is why we take serious the textual variances and the work to rightly acknowledge them and seek to know what the original authors wrote.

Unfortunately when it comes to textual variances, there has been a reluctance in many churches to teach on the topic. It has often been avoided out of a fear that it may lead people astray. Of course as we’ve found with other complicated topics the truth is actually what we as Christians should be wanting to know, understand, and properly handle. We do this because God is our only source of truth and to rightly reflect Him as image bearers, the truth matters to us. Another very rewarding reality is that when we do seek to know and understand the truth, because God is real and all things were made through Him, we always end up with a deeper faith and better understanding of the various topics that are difficult. This results in our confidence growing immensely and our ability to defend our faith growing as well.

I’m beginning our time tonight with this introduction because before we get to the good news, I want to give you the bad news. I’ll need you to stick with me so that you rightly understand the topic though, please don’t hear the bad news and check out. Let me get to the good news and rebuild your confidence in the Word. Before we do that let me give you a brief recap of the last two lessons.

**Recap previous two lessons**

A few weeks ago we dug into question Q22. What is the Bible? The Bible is God’s inspired, infallible, inerrant, authoritative, written word. Last lesson we looked at two more questions, Q23. Who wrote the Bible? The Bible was written by chosen men who were taught and carried along by the Holy Spirit. And of course Q24. Can we trust the Bible? Yes. The Bible is completely true and without error in its original manuscripts.

Our answer to question 22, begins with the Bible being God’s inspired word. We learned what that reality is anchored in and really dug into that even more in Q23 when we discussed who wrote the bible. As we learned both weeks, this means not only is God’s word inspired by God Himself and written by chosen men who were carried along by God the Holy Spirit to write the very words of God, but we also learned that God’s word is breathed out by God.

This means all the words of the original human writers were God’s very words brought forth through chosen men by the breath of God. This is exactly what Jesus said in His response to the Sadducee’s when they thought they’d surely trip Him up by presenting Him with the marriage argument. For those of you who are unfamiliar with that text, essentially the Sadducee’s who did not believe in the resurrection asked Jesus if a wife had 6 brothers as husbands due to the death of the previous brother (according to an old testament law) whose wife would she be in the resurrection. Jesus replied with you are WRONG, you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God then He said something amazing.

Matthew 22:31And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God:

Jesus said have you not **read**, what God **said** to you. Now don’t miss this guys, Jesus didn’t say have you not read what God wrote to you. He did not say have you not heard what God said to you. Jesus said have you not READ what God SPOKE to you. Jesus believed the word of God to be written down but spoken, or breathed out, by God. That’s an amazing reality that Paul was trying to declare in the 2 Timothy passage.

Now with this understanding we realize that because the bible is the very word of God, the attributes that are God’s are also attributes that will characterize the Scriptures. Here’s what I mean, because God is infallible, His word is infallible. The word of God never fails, because God Himself cannot fail. Because God is inerrant, His word is inerrant. God’s word is never wrong because God is never wrong. Because God is authoritative, His word is authoritative. When it comes to our lives, we live fully submitting to God’s word because they are the authority of God for our lives. Our feelings or desires are not authoritative. In fact, the scriptures tell us that our feelings and desires are deceitful and lead us into sin. Scripture declares that our heart is desperately wicked.

**Jeremiah 17:9-10 9The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick;**

**who can understand it? 10“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”**

We must not do as the world says and “follow our hearts.” They are not the authority in our lives. Rather we are to follow God’s word because just as God is the supreme authority over all creation, His word is the supreme authority over us, His created. What we see in this Jeremiah passage is that God knows the heart of mankind, and He has told us our hearts are desperately sick. Church we must hold to the steadfast word of God for our lives, we’ll talk more about that at the end.

Two weeks ago we ended our time with discussing the canon of scripture. Remember the canon is the rule or measuring rod (it is the list) for what is God’s word. God’s word is the books that we hold to be the authoritative word of God. The 66 books in the Old and New Testament are the canon of Scripture that we have today. Other books can be helpful, however they do not have the authority of Scripture, nor are they inerrant or infallible. Because they are not the inspired word of God, they are incapable of having these characteristics. Remember we said canon was not something a church council decided, there was no single authoritative council that said these are good and those are not good, that is not how we have come to understand the canon of scripture. Canon is a theological issue first and foremost. We know the writings that are the word of God because they prove to be God’s word through their theology.

With that, let’s dive into our topic tonight in regards to textual variants and close out Q24, Can we trust the Bible?

* **Textual variants:**

By show of hands, when I said we were going to talk about textual variants tonight, how many of you knew what I was talking about?

As I said earlier, a textual variant is a difference between similar texts from different sources in the manuscript copies that we possess. You see over the course of time since the New Testament writers penned the New Testament we have recovered manuscripts and fragments of these writings. When we compare these fragments and manuscripts we will find certain variants (or, to say it another way, differences) between the writings.

Let’s consider how this can be…The word of God was set forth (as we previously considered) by the chosen human author/mouthpiece of God, say for example the Apostle Paul. Those words Paul wrote, being carried along by the Holy Spirit, were God’s words (again, as we studied). Then, by God’s design, those words were copied so they could be spread all throughout the land. Hand copied—there were no copy machines, fax machines, cameras, etc. back then. God decreed to speak through His chosen agents in times that didn’t have the technology to photo copy and print. God, in His perfect wisdom, chose to do it this way, during those times. So, the original manuscripts were hand copied shortly after they were fist penned, and ongoing for thousands of years.

Now, when people copy something manually, there is a chance that errors in their copying can take place. Imagine, if you would, that I had typed out a five sentence thought and handed it to the people in the front row. They copied that 5 sentence thought then mixed up all the copies and handed those copies to the person behind them. This continues until the people in the back row write down what they received from the person in the row before them. If I were to compare the original or maybe even the copy the first row made with the copy the last row made would there be any differences? If there are differences these would be called the variants.

**ILL: Students you have to hold your tongues because I’ve already begun teaching this to you. Let me show this to the adults the same way I showed you okay. First let me ask how many of you brought your own bible with you? Okay how many of you have an ESV translation? How about KJV? Any NIV’s out there? Okay open up your bible to the gospel of John 5:4. Who said they have a NIV? Would you be willing to read vs. 4?**

**Don’t worry it’s not there. Now what is the common response to this? Why is it MISSING, right?**

It’s actually not missing if you look in the margins or at the bottom of the page there will likely be a footnote somewhere that shows you what verse 4 has been claimed to have said. You see verse four is a textual variant. In many of the earliest manuscripts of this text vs. 4 is not there. Now there is a simple answer to the question of “why is it missing?” It’s not there because some publishers of our printed Bibles determined to not include it in the main body of the text so that you would see that it’s not in the earliest manuscripts. This is one way that they do this, as we said before. One way they bring attention to the reality that this *may* not be or *shouldn’t* be thought of as actual Scripture.

When you are copying a document, if someone wrote a note in that document and you were unable to ask the person who wrote the document if it was supposed to be there, what might you do? Well if you were serious about ensuring that all of what was written would be passed on, you’d likely copy even the note into what you were writing. This would be the step of someone who truly cared about making sure they didn’t miss anything.

You see when these manuscripts were being copied by hand early on many times people who possessed copies would write notes in them. This was done before the time of white out and before the time of the delete button. Translators who realized they skipped a line in their copying couldn’t just hit delete, delete, delete and start again. In fact, many times the parchment or papyri would have been rare and costly so they would make a note on the side or in the margin. Now what should be encouraging to you is the fact that those who copied these manuscripts were very conservative and made sure to include anything they thought might be a part of the original letter. Rather than omit things they weren’t sure about they would either copy it into the margins like the original or they would find the spot they thought it was supposed to be in and place it there in their copy.

If there was a note or a writing near a text and it seemed to fit in the text, since it would have been very rare for them to have the freedom to ask the previous writer they would copy it in order to NOT LOSE ANYTHING. What we most likely have here in John chapter 5 is a note that someone took when they learned about this pool of Bethesda. As they were understanding it, or possibly hearing it taught from a pastor they took this note. When someone else got ahold of their copy they assumed the note that was written was a part of the text. Out of concern for the document and a desire to not leave anything out, they wrote the note that was in the margin into the text so that they would not lose any part of the original text.

Many critics point to something like this as a way of claiming the scriptures to be less reliable. However, let me pose this question, if the writings we have contain more than the original writing, shouldn’t that encourage us that at least the original writing IS in there? Church, you want a text that has more rather than a text that has less.

Think of it this way, if you have 11,150 pieces to an 11,000 piece puzzle, can you complete the puzzle rightly? Yes you can, you’ll simply have to do the work to find out what pieces belong with the puzzle and what pieces don’t. Now what about a puzzle that is 11,000 pieces but you only have 10,990? Can you complete the puzzle? No, you cannot. You see when we find verses in scripture that seem to have been added it shouldn’t cause us to toss the whole thing out as unreliable. It should cause us to carefully search and see if it is an addition or if the manuscripts that don’t have it are actually missing that part.

* **Understanding the numbers:**

So that being said, how many textual variants do you think we might have in the New Testament scripture? [Allow some answers]

We have at or slightly more than 400,000 textual variants in the NT manuscripts. Now considering there are only approximately 138,362 words in the Greek New Testament, this reality can seem a bit alarming. Church, the skeptics, those opposed to Christianity, are not going to try and help you understand this. They are simply going to spit numbers at you and say you can’t trust your bible. One of the reasons we want to teach you how to understand this information is because it is far better for you to hear these things and rightly understand them in the context of the church and fellow believers than it is in the context of the unbelieving world.

Can you imagine what it would be like to go to college as a believer and have your professor drop this information into your lap while the students around you mock your faith? This is a very real reality for your youth. If you had never heard of this truth, how would you have responded? You see it is vitally important that we understand these things in the context of the church so that we can rightly understand them and be prepared to give a defense of our faith. Speaking of the position of elder,

**Titus 1:9 (reads) 9He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.**

Though this passage is directly speaking of the position of elder, this is something that we as believers should all strive to be equipped to do. It allows us to be better at defending the faith and be better witnesses to those who do not know the truth.

With a little over 400,000 variants in the handwritten manuscripts of the New Testament, and only about 138,362 words in the Greek New Testament. Critics would say that would mean we have about 3 variants per word. Here’s an important note, these critics of the bible, those who suppress the truth of God are going to throw out these stats and leave the professing believer to drown in them. They are not likely going to share the rest of the story, even if they know it! This is why we need to know it!

If we leave that information there it really sounds disheartening right? If a critic were to say this to you what would you be able to say? Don’t worry I’m going to tell you!

First of all, 99% of those variants don’t even translate in the English language. What I mean by that is 99% of the variants have to do with nuances in the original Greek language and they have ZERO effect on the text or the meaning of the text, none at all.

1. **Reasons for the variants.**

One common example of this is called the movable nu. This is a phrase relating to a rule in Greek grammar. It is an awful lot like the English use of the word “a” and “an.” If I say I have “a” apple or “an” apple, does it change the meaning of the what I said? It definitely leaves a blue line in Microsoft word trying to save me from embarrassment, but it doesn’t change the meaning at all! This happens because languages were spoken before they were written. What I mean is it sounds correct to say “an apple” and so we used this rule because languages were spoken before they were written. The Greeks used the rule of the movable nu to speak in a clearer way. However, what we know is that it truly doesn’t change the actual text meaning at all. The moveable nu in the Greek writing was a difficult concept for many scribes and it is a very common examples of what happened in the 99% of the variants that do not matter at all.

Another common cause of textual variants is caused by similar endings. How many of you are old enough to remember having to actually read a quote, then copy it by hand onto a research paper? For those of you who aren’t, back in our day there was no copy and paste option. I can’t tell you how many times I would be copying something I was reading, I would look down at the paper where I was writing it then look back up at the paper I was copying and continue on right where I “THOUGHT” I had left off. Only to find out a few sentences later that I had skipped a line when I was copying (if I was diligent enough to proof read it and find out).

Now at this point unless you’re even older than I am, you had to get out that fantastic smelling white out to cover that line up and start over. Perhaps you were lucky enough to be using a pencil and could erase the paragraph and start over. This would happen because when you looked back to the thing you were copying from (for me it was this fantastic set of encyclopedia Britannica’s that my parents bought when I was 9) you would see a word with a similar ending and you would pick back up from that spot before you ever realized you skipped an entire line of words.

Sometimes I would never catch it then have to re-write my paper because the teacher pointed out my mistake. Well church back when these were being written they didn’t have white out or erasers. When this happened it often times wasn’t caught. When it was they would write the missing line in the margins. And then when people copied the letter they would put the margin information into the text where they thought it should go. Do you see how these patterns could cause the variants in the copied manuscripts?

Now if we remove 99% of 400,000 variants that still leaves 1% or roughly 4,000 variants which brings our numbers down now to 1 variant per three pages of the Greek New Testament text. Now that is a huge difference right?!

Church, if we are not aware of these things, if we don’t have the answer first, then we will fail to give a defense of our faith and we will fail to equip the next generation of believers for the world they are growing up in.

Let’s consider the 1%, the 4,000 remaining variants. Only half of these variants are viable variants. What is a viable variant you may ask? Well if you have 500 texts and 1 of the 500 has a variant not found in any other text, that variant would not be considered viable. There is no chance that the one variant, only found in 1 manuscript or fragment, would be a viable variant from the original letter.

Not every variant has the equal possibility of containing the original meaning. If one manuscript from the 14th century (a long time after the documents were originally written) has a variant that’s not found anywhere else, that variant is not going to be considered viable (as if it could possibly be the correct rendering of the original text).

So, taking that understanding of viable variants, we have approximately 1500 meaningful, viable, variants in the handwritten Greek New Testament texts that we possess. Now for clarities sake, we have many fragments of texts and many manuscripts. Manuscripts can contain multiple pages of scripture, sometimes multiple books. Of the handwritten Greek New Testament texts that we possess we have approximately **2 million pages** of scripture. 2 million! Of these 2 million pages we have about 1500 viable, meaningful, textual variants. Church that is downright amazing!

* **Scripture compared to the writings of Antiquity:**

The New Testament writings are hands down the earliest contested writings of antiquity (this means we have copies of the new testament texts that are dated within the first century of the actual writing, far earlier than any other than any other writings from antiquity), they are the most accurate writings of antiquity, and they are the most contested (we have the most copies to compare) writings of antiquity. If we cannot trust the New Testament writings then we cannot, and I mean not even close, trust any other writing of antiquity.

So what does that mean, who are some of the authors from antiquity?

**If any of you have ever seen the Princess Bride there’s a scene where a bad guys tries to say how smart he is. Let me put it this way, ever heard of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates… morons!**

On a serious note though, the earliest copies of the writings we have from those philosophers are dated to over a thousand years after they lived. Roman history, for that matter ancient Greek history, does not have as many manuscripts or as early contested manuscripts (manuscripts written close to the time of the history they record) as the scriptures do. If the scriptures are untrustworthy, then being consistent, we literally cannot understand or believe any historical account from that massive time in history. Even the biggest critics of scripture when pressed in a scholarly setting agree that this is the case.

In comparison the average length of writing between most works contemporaneous with the New Testament, such as the historical works of Pliny, Suetonious, or Tacitus, and their first extant copies is 500 to 900 years. This means that writings of these historical figures do not have any manuscripts to show what they wrote until 500 to 900 years after they had written them. The New Testament has nearly the entirety of it attested for within 100 years of the original authors. This difference is astounding!

In case you were wondering the time of antiquity goes from about 8th century B.C. until about the 5th or 6th century A.D. This covers a span of 1,400 years. You see the problem with the word of God for those who oppose it is NOT with its reliability. The true problem as we know, as the bible declares, and as we have taught, is that unless God gives you “eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to believe.” you will not turn to Christ.

Apart from faith, all the logical reasoning in the world for the accuracy and reliability of the biblical text will not matter. This truly becomes a presuppositional issue. If I deny that God exists and hate the writings of the bible then I will not accept the proven historicity of the scriptures. Fallen man, by nature, will fight to find ways to dismiss or re-interpret the evidence to fit what he already believes to be true.

Church, we have more reason to be confident in the scripture we hold than any other writing of antiquity. We can say, with much confidence, that the scriptures have been transcribed accurately. We can confidently hold to the trustworthy word that has clearly sovereignly been carried down through the ages. We must not be bullied by these things or be afraid of these conversations.

* **The benefit of a wide geographical collection:**

Now another key point that you need to see is that the more copies of manuscripts that we have from a greater geographical region, the better confidence we can have in the fact that we have what the original manuscripts had. Remember the original is God breathed and we want to know what the original writing said.

Often, what we hear from critics, is that the New Testament was copied much like the telephone game we played as kids. How many of you know what I’m talking about? One person in the beginning of the line is told a phrase and they share it with the person behind them who shares it with the person behind them, so on and so forth. Most often what you get at the end is something hilariously different than what was originally said.

Church this is not an accurate way of understanding the transmission of scripture. *What you actually have is the New Testament being written in multiple places, by multiple authors, to multiple audiences, at multiple times*. **REPEAT THIS.** Then over time these letters are collected and put together. We have some manuscripts that contain the gospels, some that contain the writings of Paul, and some that just contain the general epistles. Then these manuscripts are being copied and distributed all over the world. They aren’t just going to one place, for one gatekeeper to hold that we’d have to trust didn’t change anything themselves. This reality actually allows us to compare the copies we have to verify the accuracy of what was originally in the text. The point of all this is that the transmission of the text of the New Testament was not like a phone game. You see the phone game follows a single line of transmission.

If at any point that single line errs then the other copies become errs and there is no way to compare them and address the errs that exist. You see so many of the attacks on the New Testament claim that there were wholesale changes made to the text of Scripture. They claim things were changed and what we have today is not what the original writers penned. However, the manner in which the New Testament was copied and transmitted would actually make this impossible. We would have to have had a centralized body capable of gathering all the copies that were spread out all over the world, in order to make wholesale changes in this widely distributed writing. This would have been the only way to change the text away from the original writing.

The fact of the matter is no such agency existed or could have existed in this time. Christianity was made up, in large part, of a persecuted lower class and there would have been no way for them to pull off such a feat.

To top that off, since we have such early copies of the texts, it is very clear that wholesale changes have not happened. If they had we would have clear evidence that there were wholesale changes made. This is why we want a text that comes from multiple geographical locations and multiple writers. We also see the unity of these writers and what they wrote. Church this is why we can be confident that what we have written in our bible is what we had in the original text.

There are many claims that Constantine changed the text of scripture in the 400’s. If this were correct then when we find manuscripts dating back to the 2nd century (100 to 199 AD) and that only recently, what would we expect to see? Well we would expect to see differences in the text, but guess what church? WE DON”T SEE THAT! In fact, just the opposite is found. We might have one word variants, but nothing has been changed in any major way. These claims are from ignorant people who have no idea about how the text of scripture was transmitted, or dishonest people who refuse to submit to Jesus as Lord.

Here’s another reason we want as many copies from as many different geographical locations as possible. When a manuscript was brought to a distant city, it was typically already a copy of the original. Now let’s say we have 1,000 manuscripts from 1 geographical location, and 50 manuscripts from five other geographical locations (that’s a total of 250 from multiple regions for those mathematically challenged). If the 1,000 copies from one location had a variant when compared to the other 250copies from multiple locations, would we decide to go with the writing from 1,000 copy manuscript or would it be more accurate to use the writing from the 250 copies from various locations?

If you said the 1,000 copy manuscript you would be using what scholars call the “majority text” view. People that hold this view would say of course we go with the 1,000 copies because they far outweigh the 250 copies. Now think this through with me, if 1,000 copies came from one distinct area and they all had a variant that the 250 copies from 5 different areas didn’t have, what was likely the reasoning for this? Well it was highly likely that the one copy sent to that region, the original copy that region received and used to make the 1,000 copies probably had the variant in it, so that all the copies made from that copy also had the variant.

This is why it is important that we have copies from many areas because it can help us have an even greater confidence in the original manuscripts that were sent to those areas. It helps us avoid the concern that one error got copied into all the copies. It truly gives us a greater reliability that we have an accurate transmission of the original letters.

* **Transmission vs. Translation:**

I want to give one brief note here about the difference between transmission and translation. The transmission of the text is the way that the various texts were copied and spread across the world. The translations of the text is when we take a Greek or Latin text (these are typically the oldest texts) and translate them into a different language. We have over 450 English translations. The differences in translation are not the same things as a difference in transmission.

The textual variant is a difference found in a transmitted copy of scripture. The difference in translations either come from the original text used or are an error in meaning due to difficulties in differing languages. This shouldn’t cause you any concern. There are many very good translations of scripture.

* **Brief History of Transmission:**

With that clarity, it will be helpful to have some bit of church history to see the way the transmission of the text took place. Shortly after Christ, (even during his earthly ministry) Rome began a truly intense time of persecution for this new sect called “the way.” This persecution went on for 250 years. Rome tried to destroy the churches documents along with the church itself. During this time you didn’t want to be caught with a copy of these letters or manuscripts. People had to copy these things in secret. Many times they had to do it at night in candlelight. This was long before the light bulb was invented! Just imagine trying to copy two pages of manuscripts, without a fancy ballpoint pen, in a dimly lit cave dealing with insects (this was before bug spray too!). Imagine looking at manuscripts on Papyri (this would have vertical and horizontal lines going through it) in the flickering of a candlelight, with bugs swarming around your face, hoping that you would not be caught with this writing because it would cost you your life. Church it is AMAZING that we have as many manuscripts and fragments as we do, and it is amazing that they have been translated as accurately as they have. Many times entire libraries would be burned during the Roman persecution. We must see that it is downright miraculous that we have the preserved text the way we do today. How many of you would have risked your life to copy a single book of the bible and share it? Church many of us haven’t even read the bible!

When you want to stop a religious movement, you attack the foundation of that movement. If you’d like a current example just consider China. When the Chinese government goes into a Christian church (typically house churches) they destroy their documents, they have already stopped the online sale and access of the Scripture in China. In fact, the Chinese government is re-writing the bible to make it more “accurate,” as they claim. When these Christians refuse to bend the knee to the Chinese government, they are arrested and sent to “re-education” prisons where they force them to take classes in prison studying the dogma of the Chinese government.

Church it truly is amazing that we have all the manuscripts we do have. God clearly preserved His word through time and even persecution.

* **Viable Textual Variants:**

So perhaps you’re curious about the viable variants that we have in scripture. The two multiple verse textual variants that we have in our bible are found in the longer ending of Mark and the end of John chapter 7 - beginning of John chapter 8, the story of the woman caught in adultery.

Both of these texts are extremely unlikely to be a part of the original writings. When it comes to the woman caught in adultery found in the gospel of John, there are two very clear reasons why we would believe it to be an addition instead of the original text.

The first reason is a theological reason, what transpires in the account could create challenges to the honoring of God’s law given in the Old Covenant that the people were still living in. The second reason that it is likely not a part of the original manuscript is because in the earliest manuscripts we don’t see this account. It’s a story that shows up in latter manuscripts, and in those manuscripts it shows up in multiple different books. It was found in multiple places in John (not just John 7/8). It was also found in the letter of Luke. One manuscript has this story written at the end of all four gospels.

It is clear that this is a story looking for a place to land and is therefore clearly not a part of the original writing. Church what we have to do when we come to the text is ask ourselves. “What did the original author write?” If you go back to the John series that Pastor Josh taught through, he covered this section of scripture and I’d encourage you to go back and listen to what Josh taught about it.

Ultimately understanding these things really should bolster your faith. When you learn these truths it equips you to confront the false accusations and to give a proper defense of your faith. As believers we want to know the truth. We do not need to be worried that we will find out something that will prove God to be wrong. We can be confident that no such thing exists because God is real. Without the God of the Bible we would have no ability to have the world that exists and life as we know it!

* **Another poor argument:**

One more sadly popular argument that is often presented is that the early church did not believe in the deity of Jesus until the council on Nicea in 325. However, what we see clearly is that the earliest manuscripts we have declare these truths long before this council ever met. In fact in “P66” (this is the label given to a very old fragment of scripture) dated to 175-200 AD (125 years before the council of Nicea), we have the gospel of John where the writer used a symbol called the nomina sacra. This symbol was only used to take the place of God’s name out of what seems to be a superstition that by writing the name of God you might be taking His name in vain (we really don’t know why those who transcribed scripture did this and avoided using the proper word for God in those texts, but we do know that it always happened in reference to God). What this shows us though, is that a copy of the Gospel of John dating long before the council of Nicea, showed that the copyist and the letter being copied called the “Word” found in John 1, **God**! This is the same as what we have in our bibles today.

**John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

This clearly refutes any silly myth that the deity of Jesus was a concept created by early church councils.

In total, we have twelve manuscripts from the 2nd century (within 100 years of the original writings) that contain portions of all four gospels, nine books of Paul, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation. This compromises a very large portion of the New Testament that we have today. All in all we have over 124 Greek manuscripts written within the first 300 years after the writing of the New Testament.

It really is amazing that we have such an accurate transmission of the letters written by the Apostles to the church. We can have such confidence that the words we read are indeed the very words of God breathed out through the men who were carried along by the Holy Spirit!

Let me remind you of a critical point we discussed in a previous lesson. That is, the Bible is internally consistent. God’s word has no falsehood and no contradictions, in and of itself. In all of this discussion of Scripture, the most important concern is a theological concern. For example, when considering the question of canonicity (what is Scripture, and what is not) we look to scriptures consistency to verify that it belongs in God’s word. Scripture itself is the authority. So, if a manuscript was found that claims Jesus was not born of a virgin, you’d know that it clearly isn’t actually God’s word.

* **Conclusion:**

We have over 400,000 variants, 99% or more are not even understandable in the English language. Of the remaining 1% half have zero bearing on the text. The remaining variants are usually marked in your bible and typically removed from the text with a footnote or bracketed to show that it is a variant.

There is no other writing of antiquity that even comes close to this. Church, let me remind you one more time, the New Testament writings are hands down the earliest contested writings of antiquity, they are the most accurate writings of antiquity, and they are the most contested writings of antiquity. If we cannot trust the New Testament writings then we cannot, and I mean not even close, trust any other writing of antiquity.

You see church because the enemies of the faith know these things and they are certainly not going to take the time to rightly represent these truths we must know them. My hope for us, for our church and our witness to the world around us, is that by understanding these truths we can give a better defense of our faith grounded in a greater trust of God’s word. I pray that as you become more proactive to evangelize those around you, sharing the Gospel in confidence that God will save all who are His, you will do so with a greater confidence and ability to speak to these realities.

* **Sola Scriptura:**

Let’s not allow a lost world to continue on in ignorance because they refuse to submit to God. Let us be prepared to boldly and lovingly teach the truth to others in hopes that our work will not be in vain. Since we can be confident that the scriptures we have in our hands are truly the words God had breathed out through the original writers then we need to rightly understand why we use the scriptures as our sole foundation for truth.

There is a term from the reformation we like to use called Sola Scriptura. I wanted to wrap this lesson up with unpacking briefly what Sola Scriptura is and why it matters.

What does Sola Scriptura mean?

Scripture Alone is the ultimate authority.

This emphasizes that scripture is the final authority for salvation, doctrine, and sanctification for mankind.

**2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.**

**Acts 5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”**

**Matthew 4:4 But he [Jesus] answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”**

Sola Scriptura or Scripture Alone is a phrase that declares the inerrant and infallible Holy Bible is the sole source of written divine revelation.

It is not papal edicts, priestly verdicts, human tradition, or human preferences that have authority over the conscience of men. A man's conscience may never be bound by human inventions or traditions, but only by the Word of God alone. Where humans and the Word of God differ on doctrine or decrees, the Word of God takes supreme prominence.

When it comes to life of true Christians, we must see our desperate need to live according to the special revelation of God given to us in His Holy Word. If Scripture is infallible (will not fail to what God sent it to do), Inerrant (without error in its original manuscripts), authoritative (final rule of faith and life for the believer), trustworthy (the most highly contested work of antiquity with the earliest writings and most accurate transmission of the text), and ultimately God Breathed (written by chosen men carried along by God the Holy Spirit), then we must see the clear need to submit ourselves to God’s gracious revelation.

We could not know truth like we do with Scripture or have objective moral standards like we do with Scripture without God’s special revelation. We could not know what God required of us to live our lives for His Glory ALONE. Church Sola Scriptura is the battle cry of the Christian heart to rightly acknowledge all that we NEED God’s word and His word is the authority! We must learn God’s word and rightly live by and submit to it in every aspect of our lives. God has SPOKEN and we will be held accountable to what we have done with such a gracious revelation. As I’ve said all throughout our lessons thus far. Your feelings (contrary to what the world around us is trying to force down our throats) are not authoritative or infallible. When we truly seek to rightly live in light of all that God has revealed we must do so first and foremost by submitting every aspect of our lives to God’s word. This means if we “feel” like something isn’t right but God’s word declares it is, we submit to God’s word and know that it is our feelings that are wrong and not GOD. We change our feelings to fall in line with God’s revelation, not the other way around!

**Romans 2:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

Paul did not have to say here that the renewal of your mind must be based in what Scripture reveals about God. He has already made this point so very clear as does the rest of scripture and Jesus Himself. Remember the passage I started with this evening.

**John 17:14-19** **14I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.**

We must be sanctified in truth and this happens through the Word which is Truth. This is what Paul is speaking of in the Romans passage. Instead of becoming more and more like the world, be transformed by the renewal of your mind (sanctified in truth), that by testing you may discern what is the will of God. Where do we find God’s will for us, in His revelation to us – the BIBLE. In order to “**present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship**” we must go to the trustworthy word as revealed to us in Scripture.

Church God clearly has a plan and work for His word to complete. He promised us it would not return to Him void but that it would accomplish all that He had sent it out to do. God has graciously revealed Himself to us in and through His Holy Bible. We must not be a people who take that for granted. We must come again and again to the word of God to, mine the gold lying in wait for us. We must continue to submit our feelings and lives to the word of God which will never fail to be true! Church God was more than gracious to us to give us an objective ultimate standard to rest our lives upon. Make the best use of this amazing revelation by setting your mind and heart to know it, treasure it, and submit your lives unto it!

Keep in mind you cannot do any of these things unless you take it up and read!

Let’s pray!