

The Way the Scriptures have been Transmitted

David Gooding

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w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

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SESSION 1

Manuscript Evidence for the Text of the New Testament

It is wonderfully good to be back with you once again. The topic for this week's seminars and then the next one is to be *Scripture*—holy Scripture, that is. Now, scripture literally means 'what is written', and for around fourteen hundred years the New Testament was written out by hand and all those handwritten copies are referred to as *manuscripts*, which is the Latin term for 'written script', *manu*, by hand. It was only after centuries had gone by that printing was invented and came to be the means of repeating and distributing Scripture. It has been somewhat overtaken by these modern devices, called by sundry names, in which you don't handle a book, you look at a screen.

So we begin by thinking about the manuscripts—*what was written by hand*. Here is Scripture talking about itself:

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 competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16)

In the context Paul is referring to Old Testament Scripture. We shall eventually see that the New Testament possesses the same equal authority, on the same grounds—'All Scripture is breathed out by God.' It is, then, in that conviction that I personally talk to you about the way Scripture has been transmitted; I believe one hundred per cent in the divine inspiration of holy Scripture.

In the first days Scripture was written by hand; the New Testament in particular tended to be written on papyrus, a reed that grows by the Nile in Egypt. The reed was cut, then it was sliced and the thin slices put together and glued, often with the muddy, sticky water of the Nile. *Papyrus* is the origin of our word paper. Later on, copies of Scripture were written on parchment, or vellum—the skins of animals, which is much more lasting than papyrus. In humid climates papyrus would soon crumble away. I want to circulate among you now a photograph of an ancient papyrus. You may well have seen it before, but I want you to see, firstly, the actual kind of thing we're talking about when we talk of Bible manuscripts. Secondly, I circulate it because of the great age of this papyrus. It is dated by experts around about AD 200, so it is now eighteen hundred years old. The actual papyrus of which this is a photograph exists in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin—pages of it are on show in the exhibition cases there.¹

¹ It is the hope that all true Christians in Northern Ireland, before they go home to heaven, will at least go once to the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin (Dublin Castle) to see this ancient copy of the New Testament!
www.cbl.ie/cbl_image_gallery/exhibition/overview.aspx?exhibitionId=18

Of course, from this photograph you will immediately see that the edges of the papyrus are worn down and in some places half the page or more is missing. But we have enough of it to know that originally it was a collection of the Epistles by Paul. That is interesting because, when the New Testament was written, it was written as separate books or epistles; the originals were sent hither and thither and eventually copies were made. Believers in different centres would begin to collect copies of these New Testament documents. In other words, they didn't circulate first of all in a thing called 'The New Testament', in nice leather covers, as a collection of the New Testament documents. They circulated first as individual documents.

It is very interesting, therefore, to see now an actual papyrus-copy of Paul's letters (not all his letters, but a wide selection) in one volume—one *codex*, as it is called. The interesting thing also is to see the order in which the epistles were put in this papyrus volume. At the page I have open for you, you will see on the top left hand side that the Epistle to the Romans comes to its end and it is immediately followed by the Epistle to the Hebrews. At this some people rejoice, because they've long since held the theory that Hebrews was written by Paul and this utterly confounds those reprobates who insist that Paul didn't write the Epistle to the Hebrews! We shall not go into that discussion today. We are noticing here the order in which they come, because there was no fixed order of books in those days.

In the Chester Beatty Library there is a manuscript copy that contains the four Gospels in one volume. That is, it used to; mice have gorged themselves on Holy Writ over the centuries and therefore it is in a great state of fragmentation! Enough has survived to indicate that it once was a complete collection of the four Gospels. Like the Epistles, the Gospels were written as individual books and at first they circulated as individual books. Somewhere, at some time, somebody thought to put them together into one volume. The earliest known surviving copy of all four Gospels in the one volume is, where you might guess, in the Chester Beatty Library at Dublin!

As you look at this photograph you'll notice, even though you don't perhaps read Greek, that the script is not the best script that ever was invented. When you actually see these dark papyri in their cases, then perhaps you should think of some of your fellow believers eighteen hundred years ago in some part of Egypt, where this document was found. Buried in the sand of Egypt, where they get no rain, it survived and was dug up, I suspect, from some waste dump. It is evident that some of the local believers wanted to have their own copy of the Epistles of Paul. Many of them wouldn't be able to write, so we don't know who actually wrote it. It is probable that they put their money together and hired a professional scribe to write it out for them. We honour their memory of course.

Later on I have a negative photograph of a much later manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus, and when you look at that you will see it is written by a tip top scribe. The writing is actually beautiful in its regularity and precision. However, this scribe, whoever it was, wasn't the best of professional scribes. There are mistakes in the manuscript, simple mistakes in copying. The believers did the best they could. I wonder how many of us would have a copy of the New Testament if we had had to write it all by hand.

There was a Russian in the 1990s, whom John Lennox met. Because they couldn't get Bibles at that time, he got hold of copies of Communist things against the Bible that quoted the Bible. He cut out the quotations and pasted them together in an attempt to make his own Bible!

Now let me talk about this other collection of manuscripts of the Greek Bible. This is now somewhat old fashioned—it was printed in 1981. Papyri, particularly of the New Testament, are constantly being discovered. You will find a list of papyri that exist in the ongoing edition of the Greek Testament by the United Bible Societies together with the German Bible Societies—edited by the late Kurt Aland, and still being edited. At the beginning he will have a list of all the known manuscripts and the Church Fathers that are relevant to the matter. The letter on the right hand side (Ϟ) is the way the Germans have for writing the letter P, which stands for papyrus; the number is given at the side, the places where they are and the dates when they were written, as estimated by scholars. I brought this one along so that you may see some of the very early stuff. In Manchester, in the John Rylands Library, there are some fragments from the Gospel by John, dated somewhere between AD 100 and 150.² There is also a fragment-copy of a work done by a certain man called Tatian. He decided that, though they had four separate Gospels, he was going to put them all together, so he wrote out what is called the Diatessaron—one Gospel through four; he put all four together.

Now when we look at these manuscripts we have to face the fact that in many places they differ, and there is a very easy explanation for this. I don't know if you have ever tried to write out a copy of some sizeable document or book in longhand. If you haven't, have a go at it one of these days and I can guarantee that you will eventually make a number of mistakes. That is what has happened with many of the manuscripts. The famous Sinaiticus manuscript was beautifully written by professional scribes of the first order. Notice its regularity; but at the top it has some lines in smaller handwriting, with some indication down the side that the original scribe had omitted some words at this point—accidentally of course. When he was reading it through he saw his mistake and wrote the words he had omitted at the top. Big manuscripts, like Vaticanus B, not only started off with a professional scribe, but they had official correctors—first and second correctors. Many of the early believers couldn't afford that.

I've heard it said that God, who inspired the New Testament, would have kept it without any mistakes ever. Well, in the abstract, you might make that argument, but faith has to face actual realities. When you compare the manuscripts one with another down the centuries, there are thousands of differences. I began this session by saying that I believe in the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture and the New Testament in particular; I believe in it one hundred per cent. But the fact that there are differences raises the question, can we now be certain that we have in the New Testament an authentic representation of what the original writers wrote? In other words, can we be certain that, when we read the New Testament nowadays, we have, for all practical purposes, substantially what the New Testament writers originally wrote?

The matter has been the subject of many books. I recommend to you this little book by the late Prof. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* It is the first book he ever wrote, and has been used by thousands of people and in many languages to build their confidence in the documents of the New Testament. A recent edition has a foreword by N. T. Wright, a former Bishop of Durham.

² For further information, including images of the manuscript, see <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/search-resources/guide-to-special-collections/st-john-fragment/>.

I knew of one woman who was converted, or at least the first stage in her conversion was through reading this. In the 1960s there was a movement, particularly in America, called the flower people. They lived in communes and did nothing in particular all day long, other than sing and wear strange clothes. They were protesting against the establishment. At that time there came to Ireland a good man who was a believer; he had a sister who had gone over to this way of life and believed nothing about the gospel, about God or about anything. She was a rebel against everything and lived this beautiful life of the flower people. I met her after she was converted. When I asked her what made her think the gospel was true, she said she had come across a book by a scholar called Bruce, *Are The New Testament Documents Reliable?* It shattered her myths that you couldn't trust the Bible because it had been copied out so many times. So it can be a valuable tool in evangelism.

About three or four months ago, there came a knock at my door. It was a neighbour along with a woman who wasn't his wife, and she had a pram with her. The dear lady explained why she had come. She and her husband had a daughter who was hopelessly disabled; she had lived for twelve years and now had died. Her husband had given himself to that child and looked after her—she was his child and her death, along with the sorrow of her being so disabled, was almost too much for him. He was a Catholic, she said, but had left the Church, disgusted with it. Now he didn't know where he was, and was there a God, or not? To make it worse they had a second child that was in the pram, likewise disabled. She came to enquire if her husband might come and talk to me, because I had talked to their friend, my next-door neighbour. When he came and stated his problems, eyes brimming of course, he said, 'How can I believe there's any god? As for the Bible, my friends tell me that it was three hundred years before the first copy of the New Testament was made. How can you believe a thing like that?'

His problem went very deep, didn't it? It wouldn't be solved by looking at New Testament manuscripts, of course; but here was a bit of actual fact that I could call his attention to. I took him to my next room and showed him the photographs I have shown you. Facts can be an anchor hold—they are not upset by emotions. He said he couldn't read the Bible in its old language, so could I give him a Bible like the one I'd given my next door neighbour, in simple English? So I got him two. I had just got back from Crimea this last time, feeling flat out, and the next night there came a ring at my door. It was this good man, asking could he come in and talk. The upshot was he asked if he might come frequently and study Scripture and he's in the process of doing it. He had been attending a Church of Ireland just over the border and the minister there is evangelical. So my friend from around the corner told me he had decided to trust Christ and wants to study Scripture. So, what we're studying today is not irrelevant to our gospel preaching.

What can we say, therefore, about the manuscript evidence for the New Testament and its reliability? Well, we can compare it with the manuscripts we have for the Greek and Roman classics and see how the evidence for the New Testament compares. (This information was collated some years ago; it's increasing each year with new papyri being discovered.)

The total number of manuscripts of the New Testament, part or whole, was at that stage five thousand, three hundred and sixty-six. Do notice here what I said earlier about fragments. If you have a fragment of the Gospel of John that can be reliably dated to the year, say, AD 150—a fragment is enough to suggest that it came from a whole Gospel. This figure, of course, includes not only the early papyri but the later manuscripts written all down the centuries until the 1400s or 1500s. Among the early manuscripts is Papyrus 52—fragments of the Gospel of John, dated between AD 100 and 150. The Chester Beatty Papyrus 46 that you have just been looking at contains Epistles of Paul and was written about AD 200.

The earliest surviving copy we have of the complete New Testament is the Codex Sinaiticus, dated around AD 350.³ In a much faded volume, published by the trustees of the British Museum, dated 1934, there is an account of the Mount Sinai manuscript of the Bible, with a photograph of Tischendorf, who is supposed to have discovered it in the monastery down in Sinai. It was then acquired by the Russian government, who eventually sold it to Britain. Some years ago it was announced that at that same monastery monks had knocked down a wall and found boxes of manuscripts. This would have been in the late 1960s or 1970s. Some of them, they said, were of the same quality as the Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Because the monastery was inhabited by Greek Orthodox monks, the manuscripts became their property and the Greek government took control of them.

I remember meeting the ambassador from Greece in Dublin at one stage for a little party, and I exhorted him, with all the diplomatic powers I could bring to bear upon it, to make sure that the manuscripts were published as soon as possible. The scholar James H. Charlesworth was allowed to take photographs of some of them and, as far as I know, nothing has been heard of them since. Pity!

Then we have another source—quotations in the early Church Fathers. They are not always the favourite bedside reading of a lot of evangelicals, for some reason or other, but they have their uses! The early Church Fathers quoted Scripture at great length in the many books they wrote, so their writings from the second and third centuries AD can be studied to see how they quoted the New Testament. There are sufficient quotations to reconstruct the whole of the New Testament except eleven verses. When you have them and you know the dates at which they wrote (the 100s or 200s AD) it becomes further evidence for the text of the New Testament.

Then there are the early translations. When the early missionaries went to places like North Africa, if they didn't know Latin they had to learn it because the people of North Africa in those days spoke Latin, not Greek. So the early missionaries had to translate the Scriptures into Latin for North Africa. When they went to Syriac-speaking countries, they had to translate into Syriac; when they went to Egypt the local people spoke Coptic, so the New Testament was translated into various dialects of Coptic: Bohairic, Sahidic and things like that. The early translations of the New Testament into other languages total over twenty thousand manuscripts—coming, of course, from the translations made in those early days.

³ The manuscript can be viewed online at www.codexsinaiticus.org/.

Classical scholars

I'm going to compare that with the number of manuscripts for some major classical authors. Nowadays it's part of the deprivation, poverty and suppression of many folks of the present generation that they're not allowed to study the classics! Some of them have to study social anthropology! It's very curious—something I haven't quite worked out yet—why that is more beneficial than the study of great civilisations, but that's beside the point. Classical scholars study the great classical authors and are content that when they study them they have what the original authors intended—if not one hundred per cent, yet close on it. Critical editions of these authors are printed with the text and beneath it the variance that might exist in the manuscripts.

Julius Caesar wrote his *Gallic War* in simple, straightforward Latin, and centuries of schoolboys had to read it. Being in moderately simple language, it was one of the first books they were set to read. There are nine or ten surviving copies of the manuscripts. Printed books galore of course, but we're talking about manuscripts. Then you have to ask, how many years were there between when it was first written and the earliest surviving copy? The earliest surviving manuscript copy of Caesar's *Gallic War* was written nine hundred years later than Caesar's day. Does any classical scholar doubt its authenticity? No, none known to me. You will at once see the difference between that and the state of affairs with the New Testament manuscripts.

Livy, the famous historian, composed his voluminous history between 59 BC and AD 17. He wrote one hundred and forty-two books. Only thirty-five survive, and there are not more than twenty manuscripts. The oldest fragments are of Books 3 to 6, from the fourth century AD—a gap of about three hundred years.

Tacitus composed his works around AD 100. He wrote fourteen books of what he named *The Histories*. Only four and a half survive. He wrote another set of sixteen books called *The Annals*—ten in full, two in part, survive. The text survives in only two manuscripts; one of the ninth century AD and one of the eleventh century AD. No classical scholar doubts that we now have, in the manuscripts that survive, what Tacitus intended. (I used to lecture on Tacitus.)

Thucydides, the great Greek and 'the father of scientific history' composed his *History* in the fifth century BC. There are eight surviving manuscripts; the earliest about AD 900, though there are a few first century fragments. The gap there is thirteen hundred years.

Now, why do I cite that and what is the force of the argument? If you want to weigh up the authenticity from a scholarly point of view of the manuscripts of the New Testament, you can compare the attitude of classical scholars to their classical authors. If you do that, you will find that the New Testament scholars have far, far, far more evidence for the authenticity of the text of the New Testament than classical scholars have for their authors. Classical scholars would cast no doubt on the question of the authenticity of the New Testament documents. It is generally people (excuse the vulgar phrase) who don't know what they're talking about, that will come out with statements like, 'The New Testament was not copied down until three hundred years after it was written—how could you possibly trust it?' And, 'There are differences in the manuscripts'. And so forth, and so on and on.

So, on the basis of this evidence and judged by standards of scholarship in the related classical world, my first argument is that we may have every confidence that the New Testament documents are reliable.

Textual Criticism

The question will arise, of course: 'If there are differences between them, how do you decide in those cases what was originally written?' The discipline that is concerned with that is called *Textual Criticism* and those who employ themselves in that area are called textual critics. In the ears of some believers the very term smells of apostasy! 'How could anybody be a critic?' Well, I'm a textual critic! I work not in the text of the New Testament, but in the text of the Old Testament and in the world of scholarship people that work on the text like that are said to be textual critics. It is simply that you critique the manuscripts and decide which of them best represents the original in every case. So I'm a textual critic in the Old Testament. I'm not an authority in the New, but we'll discuss those matters in our next session.

SESSION 2

How Can we Know that the Bible is True?

In our first session we were talking together about the manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament. I made the point in all honesty, when one looks at the manuscripts and compares them, there are many differences between them. The question therefore arises: *How, and by what means, can we decide what was originally written?* Because, in the cases where the manuscripts differ, it is a matter of deciding between manuscripts that on the one side have this and manuscripts that on the other side have that, so to speak. The scholarly discipline that is concerned with making that kind of decision is, as I said in the first session, called textual criticism.

I do not propose to discuss at length now, or scarcely at all, how textual critics go about their task. That is quite an involved discipline and it is my permanent surprise that amongst evangelical believers, who believe like I do in the divine inspiration of holy Scripture, there are so very few who have given themselves to this subject. Ponder that a moment and you may well come to share my astonishment. We can get Christian architects and all the other professions—we are delighted with them. You would expect to find that among scholars who give themselves to the textual criticism of the New Testament or of the Old, the majority are evangelical believers, because of their very faith; and they want to be, therefore, in on the task of deciding between the variant readings in the manuscripts. But the number of evangelicals is pitifully few. Curious isn't it? I mustn't do more than express my astonishment!

As I say, I don't propose here to discuss how textual critics go about the work of deciding. But this I can quote to you; that the very famous New Testament critics of a past age, Westcott and Hort—alas slandered by many evangelicals (wrongly so)—gave it as their opinion, after a lifetime study of the manuscripts available to them in those days, that less than two percent of the whole New Testament remained in any doubt. And of that two percent most were concerned with small matters, like, for instance, there being two words for 'and' in Greek. Sometimes some manuscripts will have the one word and other manuscripts will have the other word and they both mean the same thing. Moreover, it can be confidently said that no major doctrine of the New Testament stands in any doubt because of differences in the manuscripts. That is because no major doctrine of the New Testament is dependent on one verse. I shall not discuss the methods that textual critics use; if you are interested, speak to me afterwards and next time I come I will bring books by textual critics that will let you see how they go about their task. Pray for the modern ones who are evangelical.

There's a book written recently in technical circles by a textual critic who tells the world that he was once an evangelical. He studied at Wheaton College and then went off somewhere else. The first bit of his book is sensible, straightforward textual criticism and then he goes into

telling the world that he is not an evangelical any longer because we don't have the original text of the New Testament! You can't be sure, so his faith has gone out of the window. It is a sorry thing to come across a book like that; but remember that there are other scholars, indeed evangelicals *and* non-evangelicals, that wouldn't begin to say that we don't have the original text of the New Testament.

I must trouble you now with a very fine distinction in your thinking. What do we mean by *the original text of the New Testament*? What do you mean by the term 'text'? You must distinguish between the message—the text, and the manuscripts on which it was written.

What is meant by 'the original text'?

Let me take a modern example. Suppose I write you a letter and, being somewhat of a dinosaur from an earlier age, I write it with a pen and ink on a bit of paper. You get this letter, you read it and then you make a copy of it—scanning it or something into the computer and putting it up on a website and thousands of people copy it to their websites. There are thousands of copies! Meanwhile, that precious bit of paper that I wrote my message on has long since been confined to the dustbin and you've lost it. Now let me pose a question to you: because you have lost the original bit of paper on which the message was written, would it be true to say that you no longer have *the text* of that message? Of course it wouldn't be true; you've got what I wrote—the original text, the original message (the *text*, in that sense), though you don't possess the original bit of paper on which it was written.

It doesn't matter that we don't any longer have the 'bits of paper' on which the Apostle Paul, for instance, or the four evangelists, originally wrote; we've lost them all. There are no *autographs*, as we call them, existent; but we have copies, and what was copied out was not the paper but the message, the text. If anybody tells you that we don't have the original text, he is talking very, very loosely and not exactly.

Now, since there are differences in the manuscripts, you may say, 'What percentage of the original text is beyond any doubt?' You have the statement of Westcott and Hort that a very small percentage is in any doubt. Though there are thousands of differences, I repeat, the differences should not be exaggerated, for page after page of the New Testament is, all would agree, what was originally written. We don't have the original bits of paper on which the Evangelists and Apostles wrote their message, but I reiterate it for emphasis—we do have a very high, extremely high, proportion of the message they originally wrote.

How do we know that what they wrote was true?

Now I want to come to another matter. Granted that we have in our hands today what the Apostles originally wrote—substantially what they originally wrote; and we can demonstrate that the New Testament documents are authentic, that is, they do go back to the authors, Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and so forth—we still have a fundamental question to answer, don't we? We've got what they wrote; how do we know that what they wrote was true anyway?

Of course, this is the second question that you will come at in your gospel work, is it not? Granted you can prove that we now have what those men wrote in the first century, how do

we know that what they wrote was true? Well, you can do what Freddy Bruce in his book does, many other scholars have done, and what I shall now be doing this morning—you can *check the histories*. For instance, the Acts of the Apostles and all the references they make to geography, to the current rulers, to the laws and so forth of the day in which they lived; we can check about these things in the ancient world of which we know. For instance, if Acts said that Paul left somewhere because he was in a hurry and rode his bicycle down to Thessalonica, since there were no bicycles in those days you would say that the document must have been written very late on, after bicycles existed.

There is a *Gospel of Bartholomew*, which says that Jesus didn't die on the cross; so it is much loved by Muslims. This Gospel tells you about somebody who took a ship to Jerusalem and sailed into Jerusalem by ship, which would be a remarkably difficult thing to do; so whoever wrote it didn't know much about Jerusalem. This document was written about the 1400s to 1500s AD.

We can check these things historically, geographically and so forth, against what we know. For instance, in the Acts of the Apostles we have many accounts of how the Apostle Paul was brought before the Roman authorities and accused and punished and imprisoned; and there are the accounts of our Lord's trial under Pontius Pilate. Some years ago, a classical scholar by the name of Sherwin-White wrote a book on Roman Law as depicted in the New Testament.⁴ He came to the verdict that the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles in particular, is marvellously accurate in its references to the legal proceedings that Paul had to endure under the Romans.

And again we are told in the Acts that the Apostle Paul, when he came to Corinth, was attacked by the Jews, who eventually brought his case before the Roman governor and asserted that Christianity was *an illegal religion*, as the Romans would have put it—the Jews were acknowledged as a legal religion by the Romans. They were very merciful to Jews and continued to be until at last the Roman emperor came under the power of the church; from the 300s onwards the church used its power to persecute the Jews, but that's another story. Anyway, the Jews came before the Roman governor in Corinth and said, 'Christianity is not a proper Jewish religion; it is a sect and should not be covered by the law that establishes Judaism as a legal religion.' Paul and company were hauled before the Roman governor, but he decided that this was no more than a simple dispute about words and phrases in the holy books of the Jews and he dismissed the whole case out of hand. Luke says that the name of the Roman governor was Gallio. There were long decades in which scholars said that no such Gallio was ever known in the Latin records. Luke had got it wrong; there was no such governor as Gallio. Then an inscription turned up which showed that there was a Gallio! All such evidences, of course, are worthy of study; they are some of the objective things by which you can judge the reliability of the New Testament.

⁴ A. N. Sherwin White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament: The Sarum Lectures 1960-1961*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

Was the story of Jesus of Nazareth concocted by the apostles?

That said, they don't come to the heart of the matter. The New Testament claims, for instance, that Jesus is the Son of God—how do you prove that? It is absolutely essential to our doctrine and to our gospel, but how do you prove it? What evidence will you cite in favour of it? Could it not have been that in their enthusiasm the early Christians exaggerated the claims of the Lord Jesus? Many people have claimed that Jesus himself didn't claim to be the Son of God—it was the early Christians who got excited and exaggerated his claims. Is it a story that the early Christian writers made up? Even though the manuscripts are reliable, in the sense that they report to us what the apostles said and wrote, did they make up what they wrote, or is the story correct? The evidence that we shall need to cite for that is somewhat different from the mere facts of manuscripts and things. Manuscripts are relevant, they go back to the first century; but is the story true, or was it concocted by the apostles?

There is one bit in the Gospels and in the Epistles, therefore, that we may be absolutely certain that the apostles didn't invent, and it lies at the heart of the Christian gospel—the death of Christ upon a cross for our salvation. How do we know they didn't invent it? Well, to start with, you will find in the Gospel records, when our Lord first began to teach his Apostles he told them that he must go to Jerusalem and be executed. Then, no less an apostle than Peter rebuked him straight: 'Nonsense, Lord, that is never going to happen to you; you've got the wrong idea there' (Matt 16:21–22). More than once, when he said he was going to die at Jerusalem, it is said that they didn't understand him and didn't believe him. They tell us, one and all, that when our Lord was in the garden of Gethsemane and the Jews came with a squad of Roman soldiers to arrest our Lord, Peter started to defend him with the sword. Our Lord rebuked him and voluntarily surrendered himself to the Romans, whereupon all the Apostles forsook him and fled and Peter denied him (John 18). After his resurrection, of course, their doubts were silenced and they preached the gospel.

But notice what Paul says about the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. The gospel he preached was of the cross of Christ, 'We preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:23). Even as he preached it he realised that it was offensive to the Jews and to the Greeks it was utter folly. Fancy going to educated Greeks and telling them that the answer to all the world's problems was a man who was crucified by the Romans as a criminal on a cross! Yet Paul preached it. That to me is evidence that he didn't invent it. He preached it because it was true—demonstrated to be true by the resurrection of our Lord.

What is more, it is true in another sense. How do you know that a certain medicine is good for indigestion? Well, you take it on the authority of the scientist who says that it is good because he made it. So you take it and find that it works, it meets your need. How do I know that bread is good for hunger? Well, in the end, by eating it of course. How do we know that Christ is true and it is his death for sin at Calvary that meets our profoundest need? Well, he not only taught us that we ought to be good, but to face the fact that we are not good. We have sinned and come short of God's glory and our first need is for forgiveness. Our own moral standards fall short and sin matters to God. His standards mean that our sins deserve eternal death. There is no other message, as far as I'm aware, on the whole of this planet; no other religion that says to you, 'I am your Creator, I love you with a Creator's love. You are a sinner and, rather than that you perish, I died to bring you forgiveness.'

This goes back to our Lord—not merely back to his apostles putting an interpretation upon his death. It's evident from one or two things.

First of all, our Lord's own remark: 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). This was our Lord interpreting what the purpose of his death would be.

Second, a matter of sheer history and the institution of the Lord's Supper. From the earliest days the Christians met together; if on no other day then on the first day of the week to conduct a ceremony in which they ate bread and drank wine in memory that Jesus gave his body for them at Calvary and poured out his blood for them for the forgiveness of sins. There is strong historical evidence that this goes back right to the very beginning. It goes back to the time before there were any Gospels written, when the stories of Christ were put around by the apostles who knew them and heard them and before the Epistles were written. It goes back to Christ, of course.

It is an exceedingly important part of our gospel that we keep that tradition. In one extreme you have the sacramental traditions that turned the memorial supper into a sacrifice and that was wrong. In reaction to that you've got many Reformation churches that made the Bible central, with the preacher standing in the pulpit and expounding the Bible and the Lord's Supper, if celebrated at all, was only about once a month or once in six months. Before the New Testament was written the believers gathered to keep the Lord's Supper in direct tradition from our Lord's command. It was the practice of the early church, because it is central.

Our Lord could have told his apostles to do many things to remember him. He could have told them when they meet to read the Sermon on the Mount and thus remember him primarily as a moral teacher. He could have told them to read the record of his miracles and thus remember him as a doer of miracles. But he didn't choose either of those, he chose emblems that point to his death for our sins. Implied in it is not only his sinless humanity, but his deity. You cannot say that forgiveness of your sins depends on the death of Christ and then proceed to deny his deity, can you? If the one who died for you was not God incarnate then you are not saved and you don't have any forgiveness. Right from the beginning when the gospel was preached and formulated, our Lord's death was a fulfilment of the Passover. The gospel is that he died, 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3), and in remembering the Lord's death we remember all those scriptures in the Old Testament that prophesied that he would die for our sins and were fulfilled when he died. According to his own statement, he would be rejected and crucified and the third day he would rise again. You cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper without remembering his resurrection, so that we keep a balance here.

Where it is necessary we talk about manuscripts and the historical confirmation of the New Testament records, archaeology and all the rest of it, and the manuscripts for the establishment of the text, but our evidence goes much deeper, doesn't it? Now what I'm about to say may appear to contradict a basic principle that you may often have heard enunciated. Ponder it anyway—I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. If you decide that I'm a heretic, treat me mildly and try to convert me!

I want to read what our Lord Jesus himself said to his contemporaries in Jerusalem.

You sent to John [the Baptist], and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. (John 5:33–35)

Ponder the historical situation. John was sent by God to be a witness to Christ; a witness to the light, to prepare the people for the coming of Christ. And when Christ came John continued to be a witness: ‘This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me”’ (John 1:30), testifying to his pre-existence and to his present superiority and that he would eventually die as the Lamb of God for our sins (v. 29). He was the one God appointed to baptise people in the Holy Spirit. John was a witness to Christ and it was very good and profitable therefore that people could go to John and be guided by him to the Saviour. In a sense, believing what John said about him because John was a prophet, they believed on the strength of what John said.

I dare say if I ask some of you, ‘Why do you believe the Bible is the word of God and when did you first come to believe that?’, you would say, ‘My mum told me,’ or ‘My dad and all the elders in my assembly told me and that’s why I believe it.’ They were true witnesses, weren’t they?

Now, look at what our Lord says: ‘You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man’ (John 5:33–34). The ultimate witness that Jesus is the Son of God cannot come from man. Because he is the Son of God, he is ultimately his own evidence. His witness is from God; he is the Son of God and by definition God is his own evidence. Why must that be? It is because nothing in the whole universe is ultimately independent of God; even the devil is not independent of God. God made him anyway—he didn’t make him fallen, but he made him. There is no authority in the whole universe independent of God; God has to be his own evidence. And what is true of God is true of Christ—ultimately he is his own evidence.

It would be a funny thing if, when you got home to heaven and you saw all the shining angels, you didn’t want to fall down and worship them, like John did. But they should have to say, ‘You mustn’t do that up here, I’m just a servant like you.’ Suppose you couldn’t make up your mind amongst all these mighty beings and servants which one is the Lord Jesus, who would you consult as the final authority? If you asked Gabriel he would tell you the truth; but if you needed to ask who is the ultimate authority to decide which one is Jesus, it would be a bad job—he is his own evidence, there is no witness independent of Christ. When we meet Christ we meet God incarnate and ultimately the witness he receives is not from man. He has been pleased to appoint John the Baptist and the prophets to prophesy his coming and the apostles to expound his doctrine, but the authority and the evidence ultimately comes from him.

Like you, I believe the Bible is the word of God because my parents told me and all the elders said so and the preachers said so, but if you ask me now, in my ripe old age (and it’s been true for many decades), why I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, I shall not say, ‘I believe it because the Bible says so.’ Though it does say so, of course; but if you are pressing me for my ultimate evidence, I believe it because Christ said so and I believe the Bible is the

word of God because Christ said so. That's the way round it is: I believe the Bible is God's Word *because Christ said so*.

I shall try to demonstrate that too in a moment, but lest you should think I'm talking impractical, academic ideas or something, it is important for you in your evangelism to grasp this.

You say to your friend, atheist or whatever he is, 'You ought to read the New Testament and find out that Jesus is the Son of God.'

He replies, 'It's no good telling me to read the New Testament! You say that it's inspired by God?'

And you say, 'Yes, it's inspired by God!'

He says, 'But I don't believe it. If I read the New Testament I shall find it's full of miracles; I don't believe miracles can happen, so there's no good reading the New Testament! I don't believe it's the word of God and I don't believe in miracles!'

What do you say now?

'Well then, you're lost forever. There's nothing I can do about that, because if you don't believe the Bible is the word of God it's no good you reading it then.'

My answer to a chap like that is to say, 'Do you read the daily newspaper?'

Most of them do. So I say, 'Do you suppose that everything that you read in the newspaper is true?'

'Well, of course not!'

'But you read it nonetheless?'

'Yes!'

'Well, how do you decide which is true and which isn't?'

'Do you think I'm so stupid that I can't discern what is true and what is not true?'

'Well, why won't you read the New Testament like that? Start reading it, and listen to Jesus Christ—see what he says.'

I rely upon this, that Christ is his own evidence.

In the second place, the Holy Spirit has come down from heaven to authenticate Christ. Believing in Christ and finding him real, his faith will be in Christ and he will come to accept the rest of Scripture on those same terms—*because Christ said so*.

I'm not discouraging you from distributing the Bible! Carry on distributing it of course; get everybody that you can to read it, because in it they will find the Saviour who will talk to them. The Bible is true, but I would remind you that, when Peter got up on the day of Pentecost to preach Christ, the New Testament wasn't written. They preached the gospel, 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3). They quoted the Old Testament of course, the New Testament wasn't yet written; but they preached the living Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven.

Let me finally in this session call your attention to Christ and his authority for the New Testament. What does our Lord say about the New Testament that was yet to be written?

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25–26)

The authority of the risen Lord

What authority do we have for thinking that the Gospel records are true and authoritative? Here it is—the Holy Spirit, sent down from heaven, was to be responsible for bringing to their memories what Christ had taught to them. This is Christ, before he died, pointing to the authority of the Gospels that were yet to be written.

Let us listen to our Lord in the Upper Room,

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’ (John 20:21–23)

Let us ponder the words because, as we know, they have been grievously disputed—indeed sometimes perverted in the course of the centuries. Let us put them straight into their immediate historical context. There is the Lord, now in the Upper Room, commissioning his apostles as they were about to go forth. Just as the Father had sent him, now he was sending them. The first function our Lord mentions is this: ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’ What does it mean? Some commentators have said this means that when the church meets and exercises discipline, if a believer has seriously offended they are to excommunicate him; if he repents they are to forgive him and bring him back. It’s a question of church discipline. But it seems to me to be highly unusual that our Lord would have thought of that as the first thing he said when he appeared to his apostles in the Upper Room—‘Gentlemen, I’m about to send you out to evangelise the world and you will have to exercise proper discipline in the church.’ Hardly!

The question was, on whose authority were they to preach forgiveness? Here is Peter on the day of Pentecost—and a good way of testing what these words mean is to read the Acts of the Apostles and see how the Apostles interpreted them in their behaviour. Here is Peter, preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit come down from heaven and some of the very murderers of Christ are now pricked to the heart in their conscience and realise they have murdered their Messiah.

They come to Peter, ‘Sir, what must we do? We’ve murdered the Messiah, what on earth shall we do? Is there any forgiveness for it, and if there is how do we get it?’

And Peter replied, ‘Well, don’t take it from me; what you must do is to read the New Testament.’ Really?

If you were leading somebody to Christ today and they said,
‘How can I get this forgiveness you talk of?’ you might say,

‘Well, don’t take it from me; read this epistle by Peter, or this from Paul—‘[Christ] in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Col 1:14).

Don't take it from me; it's holy Scripture that says, 'For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more' (Heb 8:12).

But on the day of Pentecost the New Testament hadn't been written. Yet here is Peter and, when the crowd asked how were they to be saved, he doesn't hesitate. He doesn't say, 'Go and read the Old Testament,' he says, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:38).

What authority did Peter have to say that? Well, he had the authority given him by our Lord in the Upper Room, didn't he? Symbolically, our Lord breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:22). Of course that was what happened when John and Peter and Paul wrote their epistles, for they were written by inspiration of God—inspired by the Holy Spirit as they wrote.

Peter was already being inspired of the Lord by the Holy Spirit when he stood on the day of Pentecost and pronounced the terms of salvation. When we go to his epistles, or to Paul's epistles, or to Hebrews, we believe it to be the word of God. But you've got to ask, who wrote it and by what authority did they write it? Well, by the same authority as they originally spoke it, of course—the authority given to them by the risen Lord through the Holy Spirit. Our Lord said to them while he was still with them,

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes [notice his title here: not the Spirit of grace, but the Spirit of truth], he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12–15)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak.

'Whatever he hears he will speak'—who does he hear it from? 'All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you'—it's the Holy Spirit speaking from the risen Lord.

Here our Lord says, 'He will guide you into all the truth'—that is the authority for our epistles. Those epistles take us beyond what is said in the Gospels, do they not? 'Into all the truth' and they take us into the future, 'the things that are to come.' Here is our Lord then, stating what is the authority behind the Epistles and the prophetic parts of the New Testament.

What a lovely thing our Lord says, 'When the Holy Spirit has come, *he shall glorify me.*' You will find the Holy Spirit doing it from the very start on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost indicated that you would know the significance of the Holy Spirit coming, not simply after Christ was raised but after he ascended. Peter says: '[Christ] having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing' (Acts 2:33). Who is Jesus, then? Says Peter, 'God has made him both Lord and Christ' (v. 36)—in the fullest sense of those words.

We read in Hebrews 1 how the Holy Spirit revels in glorifying the Lord Jesus through his inspired Apostles. And it is so again when our Lord came to dictate the book of the Revelation to John: 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things for the churches' (22:16). Those last letters that were written are the words of the one who walks in the midst of the lampstands and holds the stars in his right hand (1:16). That's our risen Lord talking! When each letter finishes, as in all the other letters in the Revelation, he adds, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (2:29). The Spirit had come in the name of Christ, speaking not from himself but from Christ, taking the things that are Christ's and revealing them to us. We have our Lord's own authority for the New Testament Gospels, for the Epistles and for the prophetic part of the New Testament.

To sum up my personal faith, I believe that the New Testament is God's inspired word. I believe it because Christ says so and I believe Christ. You will decide what you do with that personal testimony of mine. You must ask whether it is according to Scripture. Maybe you will go away saying, 'I believe Christ is the Son of God because the Bible says so—it's that way round with me'. Carry on doing it; it's true anyway—it is the word of God and if you believe it you won't be wrong.

One day you may be asked, 'Do you believe the Bible because it is the word of God? Who said so? Who tells you that what Matthew wrote is the word of God? Who tells you that what Paul wrote is the word of God?' You will come round to the position, 'Christ tells me that what was written was inspired by the Holy Spirit.'

SESSION 3

The Question of Translation

I want to use this session to talk about the next major thing that comes up when we have settled the matter of the original manuscripts. We have seen where the authority for the New Testament eventually leads and the next thing that comes up logically is the question of translation. *Do the translations available to us translate the original Greek correctly and accurately?*

Now, as you know, this matter of different translations of the Bible has given rise to a lot of anxiety and contention amongst believers. It is not our job, if we understand something about textual criticism, manuscripts, languages and so forth, to shake people's faith. We must use our scholarship, if we have any, to establish their faith and to strengthen it.

We must be particularly careful with older people who were brought up to believe that the Authorised Version is inspired from cover to cover and therefore feel that any translations that differ are very suspect and not to be used—at least in the church. We must be careful, I repeat, in how we approach them. If a man says to me, 'I believe that the Authorised Version is inspired of God from cover to cover,' I reply according to what I think he means. If he means, 'I believe the word of God is inspired of God from cover to cover,' I say, 'Hallelujah'. If he asks, 'Do you believe that the Bible is God's inspired word?' I reply, 'Of course I do.' Sometimes that is enough and all that needs to be said.

Beware that we give the impression through our learning that we undermine people's faith. That said, we must, and I'm sure we do, face this matter of different translations and we need to ask ourselves why they differ.

To start our proceedings, therefore, I wish to show you the frontispiece of the Authorised Version. It announced itself to the world as,

'The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, translated out of the original tongues.'

Now notice, 'And with the former translations diligently compared . . .'; so there were English translations before the Authorised Version.

Then it says '*and revised.*'

The Authorised Version was a revised version, and they who object to reading the revision that was made in England in 1885 because it is the *Revised* and they prefer the *Authorised*, forget (if they ever knew) that the Authorised in its day was a revised version.

David Daniell's book, *The Bible in English*,⁵ is a history of the Bible in English, listing and describing many of the translations that preceded the Authorised Version, as well as others. I've brought along the volumes of Tyndale's New Testament and the Old Testament. In the

⁵ Yale University Press, 2003.

New Testament, the Authorised Version is about eighty per cent Tyndale anyway and it is useful to know about those earlier translations as well as the modern ones.

Why do translations differ?

There are a number of different reasons why they differ. Bible classes and others ought to be taught, little by little as they can bear it, the actual facts about these things so that when they meet differences they are not stumbled. They can understand why they have arisen.

Here is the Authorised Version compared with other versions and here it is a question, not so much of translation, which more exactly translates the original—the difference is caused by the fact that some manuscripts have one *reading* (as we call it) and other manuscripts have other readings. It is a question therefore of which manuscripts you decide to follow when you translate the New Testament. So some manuscripts have:

‘Blessed are they that *do his commandments*, that they might have right to the tree of life, and enter in through the gates into the city’ (Rev 22:14).

Other manuscripts have in that very same verse, not ‘Blessed are they that do his commandments’ (KJV), but ‘Blessed are those that *wash their robes*’ (NIV/RV).

It is not a question of whether you translate accurately or not; the prior question is which manuscripts you shall follow.

This is an important matter, of course. It is talking about the conditions necessary for entering the eternal city. Outside is the lake of fire; on what, therefore, does anybody’s entry into that eternal city depend? Judged doctrinally from what the rest of the New Testament says, what would you decide? Which translation would you choose, if it were on the basis of consistent New Testament doctrine? Is the right to eternal life dependent on *doing the commandments* or *washing your robes*?

If it depends on washing your robes, what does that mean? Well, we could answer it in the terms that John uses elsewhere in Revelation, ‘They have washed their robes . . . in the blood of the Lamb’ (7:14). That is, the right to enter into the eternal city is dependent on *cleansing by the blood of the lamb*. By *redemption*, as Paul says, ‘We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses’ (Eph 1:7).

Here’s a tricky question therefore. Do you decide your doctrine on the basis of the manuscripts or do you decide which manuscripts to follow on the basis of your doctrine? I suggest that it is normally a mixture of the two that should guide us. When you look at the Greek behind it and put it into English letters, in the first one, ‘Blessed are those that do his commandments,’ you will notice how very near in the Greek it is to the other one. It could be that copyists confused the letters.

You can also judge the matter by what is John’s normal vocabulary. Elsewhere in Revelation he talks, not about *doing* the commandments, *keeping* the commandments is John’s normal phrase. Evangelicals, who nevertheless follow the Authorised Version and declare it is everywhere correct, choose the former because the Authorised translators based themselves on manuscripts that read it so. Therefore, although they are evangelicals, they’ve got to somehow justify the phrase ‘doing his commandments’ as the basis of entry into the eternal city.

Their argument normally goes: 'If you are a genuine believer, you have eternal life through faith—you have been *justified by faith*. That is the basic condition. But if you are a genuine believer you will do the Lord's commandments anyway. And so, instead of putting the *condition*, the manuscripts have put the *result*, so to speak. You wouldn't need that if you followed the other manuscripts, of course! I cite it now simply as one of the reasons that can exist for differences in translation; some translations follow one set of manuscripts, some another.

Different ways of saying the same thing

Now let's look at another reason why translations differ. This is Luke 5:3. The Authorised says, 'He entered into one of the ships.' The NIV, 'He got into one of the boats.' If you were talking in terms of naval architecture, a boat isn't the same thing as a ship, but in everyday speech boats and ships are one and the same thing. It makes no difference whatsoever whether you say, 'He entered into one of the ships,' or 'He got into one of the boats.' As for 'entering in'—you'll have to tell me! As I said, I'm a dinosaur, so my language habits are not the same as the younger generation. Nowadays, do people *enter in* to anything? Do you say, 'I entered into my car' or 'I got into my car'? That's modern English and this is the way language changes. So in Luke 5:3 KJV and NIV there is a difference, without being a difference. Different words, same meaning.

But now look at Luke 23:15. JND says, 'And behold, nothing worthy of death is done by him'. The NIV, 'As you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death'. Different English ways of phrasing it, but meaning the very same thing. One is slightly more paraphrased than the other. Now let me give you the Authorised translation, 'Nothing worthy of death is done *unto* him.'

This is Pilate talking to the crowd and Pilate is trying to say, 'I don't find any fault in this man. I sent him to Herod and Herod sent him back and Herod agrees, he hasn't done anything worthy of death.' When the Authorised therefore quotes Pilate as saying, 'You can see that nothing worthy of death is *done to him*,' it doesn't make sense. In fact, it is a straightforward mistranslation of the Greek. The Greek says, 'Nothing worthy of death has been *done by him*.' Translating can be a difficult job; there never was a translation made that didn't somewhere or other mistranslate the original Greek. Sometimes, therefore, translations differ because one or more translations have mistranslated the Greek.

Literal translation

Now let's look at another set of reasons why translations differ. In Matthew 9:15 the Authorised Version says, 'Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?' You might well ask, 'What on earth are "children of the bridechamber"?' I don't know what your friend who has never read the Bible before would make of this. The Greek here is simply translating literally the Aramaic or the Hebrew. Children of the bridechamber means, the bridegroom's guests. So the Authorised has a very literal translation of the Greek, which says, 'children of the bridechamber'.

But there comes a point where, if you translate a language literally into another language, it ceases to make sense. If you are in France and go to the greengrocer's and say, 'I'd like to buy some potatoes,' the Frenchman, if he doesn't know English, will look at you quaintly. 'What do you mean *potatoes*?' And you eventually learn that the French for potatoes is 'apples of the earth', *pommes de terre*. Then your French friend that you met in France comes and stays with you in Northern Ireland. He says he would like some *pommes de terre*, so you take him down to the greengrocer's shop. You say to the greengrocer in Belfast, 'My friend here wants some apples of the earth.' The greengrocer might find that difficult to understand, so to translate 'apples of the earth' properly and sensibly you mustn't translate it literally.

A literal translation of Matthew 9:15 is to give an incorrect translation, 'sons of the bridechamber'. 'Children of the bridechamber' means 'guests of the bridegroom'. If your friend said, 'I was at young Joe's wedding,' and you ask, 'How did it go; how many children of the bridechamber were there?'—he wouldn't know what you were talking about! You should have said, 'How many guests were there?' We cannot therefore always translate Scripture literally; what they meant by their idiom has got to be translated into English idiom. That's why, sooner or later, translations have to be brought up to modern standards of English.

Dynamic translation

So look now at another reason. It is a principle of translation much followed by newer translations, called *dynamic translation*. It means not translating literally, but translating the force of the original into the same kind of forcefulness in the receptor language. In the course of translating the original, some dynamic translations can add rather a lot of *interpretation* instead of being content to have *translation* and it is not good to have too much interpretation. Some people therefore reject modern translations because they say, 'They have indulged in this dynamic translation business.' So did the Authorised, of course; but not so much as the modern translations do.

In Romans 6:1–2, Paul says, 'Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? *May it not be so.*' In Greek that is a very strong and powerful phrase; whereas, if you translate it literally into English, 'may it not be so' sounds like a prayer or something and is rather weak. So even the Authorised didn't attempt to translate it literally but used a dynamic translation, *God forbid*. In the Greek there is no word there for 'God' and no word for 'forbid'. It is a dynamic translation; they did it to bring out the force of the Greek in similarly forceful English, 'God forbid'. Other translators have similarly used dynamic translations, J. N. Darby for instance. I don't know if he'd even heard of the phrase 'dynamic translation', but he uses one, *Far be the thought*. I could think of others, *not on your life*, or something like that. The NIV/ESV says, *by no means*—not quite so powerful as 'God forbid', would you say? Not so much *dynamic* in it, but there you are.

In other words, in translation sometimes you have to bear in mind not merely what the original word is saying, but the *emotional connotation* of it, and you haven't fully translated it unless you can convey the emotional connotation as well as the literal meaning. In translating emotional meaning in the receptor language, however, one has to be careful of another consideration.

We have to be careful in presenting the gospel that we don't descend into using *slang* ourselves. If you are talking to university students in the shop or somewhere, perhaps you come down to their language, but not if you are talking to an older congregation who would regard slang as inappropriate for holy Scripture.

For instance, John 19:30, 'He gave up the ghost' is a phrase that you will find in the older English translations. 'He died' means more or less the same thing. I don't think anywhere in the Authorised Version 'He went home' is used, is it? Certainly not, 'He pegged out'. Why not? Would you use the phrase, 'Having served his day and generation he pegged out'? (Acts 13:36). It means the same thing, so why wouldn't you use it? 'He went home' — try that on the atheist you meet that never has read the Scriptures at all and doesn't know the first thing about Christianity. If you told him that Mr Smith 'went home', what would he make out of that? To you, what is the difference between 'he died' and 'he went home'? He went home to glory — 'away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:8). So we say, 'The dear brother has gone home.' This is the Christian view of things and Christians understand it, but anyone who doesn't know the Bible won't know what on earth you are talking about. Perhaps he went home from his office after his work one day, or something? It also has the Christian implication, 'his decease' (Luke 9:31 KJV), which of course is a much more formal, almost a legal, term.

It's a matter of language and English is a notorious idiom. It has many different levels. 'Lay down, lay down, thou weary one, thy head upon my breast.'⁶ Isn't that delightful? Simple, straightforward English, but a bit old-fashioned now. Let me turn that into the Latinised form of English, with full technical terms. 'Deposit, deposit, you fatigued person, your cranium on my sternum.' It means exactly the same thing; but then it doesn't mean anything like the same thing! The simple English, 'Lay down, thou weary one, lay down, thy head upon My breast', is appealing to our hearts and therefore it means something very different from the technical language, 'Deposit, you fatigued person, deposit, your cranium on my sternum.' Sometimes in preaching it is good to use as much simple, straightforward Anglo-Saxon English as you can, instead of complicated, long, Latinised words.

When it comes to translations, therefore, I can understand some of the older folks being upset by what seems, to them, to be bordering on slang.

Words that have changed in their meaning

So let me now refer you to other examples of why translations differ. Romans 6:6, the Authorised Version says, 'Knowing this, that our old man *is crucified* with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.' This sounds to many people in English as a present tense because it uses the verb 'is', which is present tense of the verb 'to be', and from it they take the fact that we ought to crucify the old man every day of the week. 'Is crucified' in the Authorised is a correct translation of the Greek, but it is old English and represents a perfect tense in old English. In modern English the usage has changed. So if you look in more modern translations, like the Revised, it says 'Knowing this,

⁶ Horatius Bonar, 'I heard the voice of Jesus say', 1846.

that our old man *was crucified* with him' —past tense. It doesn't mean that the Authorised has got it wrong, for in the days of the Authorised that's how you would have spoken of the past.

Let's take another example. Our Lord had arrived in Bethany, Martha had gone out to meet him, had some conversation with him and then she went to call Mary. She said to Mary, 'The master *is come*, and calleth for thee' (John 11:28). 'Is come' sounds like a present tense to us, but it is a past tense: 'the master *has come*.' The French for 'I have come' is 'I am come', *je suis venu*. That idiom still holds in French: 'I am come', *je suis venu*. The equivalent in modern English is 'I have come.'

It is important doctrinally to see in Romans 6 that Paul is saying that our old man 'was crucified' with Christ. And the same thing is true in Galatians 2:20, 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' 'I am crucified', as though it was a present tense, but it's a past tense in Greek: 'I *have been crucified* with Christ'. That is doctrinally important. Let me repeat, the Authorised is not wrong; it was right in its day. That is the way they talked of a past tense in English in those days, but if you insist on just repeating it nowadays you'll give the wrong impression to folks in modern English, who will think you are talking about a present activity instead of something that happened in the past.

Let me take an easier example of that. Matthew 6:6, 'But thou, when thou prayest . . .' The Authorised Version says, 'enter into thy closet.' A *closet* really meant a hidden room, a room that was closed to others so you didn't get interrupted—an inner room. But that is not the meaning now, and even in my youth a closet meant a lavatory, a water closet. It would sound very funny if you said to your modern friend who had never read the Bible, 'Do you know the right way to pray? The way to pray is to get into your closet.' To Americans it would sound very odd, for in America a closet is a cupboard. They say, 'Hang your coat up in the closet.'

So here, therefore, we have to deal with the fact that words can change their meanings over the years and to be intelligible we must bring our language up to date. That is why, in fact, we need modern translations.

Translation of technical terms

Church

Now let's think about the translation of technical terms. There is a word in Greek, *ekklesia*; we have it in English in the adjectival form 'ecclesiastical'. In the Greek of Athens, in the days of their democracy, it meant the assembly of all the male citizens over a certain age. In English it has for long centuries been translated as 'church'; though in Scotland it was translated as *kirk*. A Scot goes to the *kirk*, whereas an Englishman says he goes to church. *Kirk* is a very interesting word. It is a corruption of the Greek word *kyriaki*, an adjective normally attached to the word *agia*, which is a house. So *kyriaki agia* is the Lord's house, and that came into Scottish as the *kirk*, the Lord's house—church in English.

How should you translate it in the New Testament? Well, here I put up three translations for you. Dear old Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English before the Authorised Version was translated, declined to use the word 'church'. By his day the *church* was the *building*, the big building downtown where Christians met. You 'go to church', 'he came out of the church', 'in the church there's an organ' and all this kind of thing. So Tyndale wanted

to get across the notion that the church is not in that sense a physical building, *the church is the people*. So he translated it *congregation*; 'Christ loved the congregation, and gave himself for it' (Eph 5:25). Tyndale's protest was against religiosity that had taken and developed the word 'church' so that it now generally referred to the building where Christians met. He deliberately used the English to bring it back, to get the right idea across. It is not the building that forms the church, it is the people—the believers, the congregation. 'Christ loved the congregation.'

The Authorised Version was authorised by 'The most high and mighty Prince, James,' etc.—hence it's called the 'Authorised' Version. King James, though he was a Protestant, was against all the little groups, like Baptists, meeting in what he would call conventicles and the translators had to do what pleased him when he had the Authorised Version translated. From the preface to the original you will notice where it was to be read: 'appointed to be read in churches'—not in your home. Authorised to be read as the official version in churches. You'll understand Mr Darby, therefore, seeking for another term, 'Christ loved the *assembly*.' You'll see all the connotations, sometimes unspoken ones, that cling to these words; it is important to ponder long what kind of translation you give to some of these technical terms.

Flesh

Now look at another term that has proved very difficult for translators, the Greek word *sarx*. It means, in the first place, flesh; and very often it is used of that constituent part of a human body that is flesh. John 1:14, 'The Word became flesh', meaning the Word who eternally existed—the Word was God—at one point became human without ceasing to be God. It is used, therefore, to express that he became fully human. John says the Word became 'flesh'; but then it can carry different connotations in other parts of Scripture. One of the prophets rebuked Israel in God's name for their trust in Egypt and its mighty battalions of horses and chariots, instead of trusting in the living God. He says, 'The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit' (Isa 31:3). So flesh can mean *weak human beings*.

Now look at this passage, 'You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit' (Rom 8:9). Or the passage in Galatians 5:17, 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.' What does 'flesh' mean in those contexts?

The modern New Living Translation has said to itself, 'But people won't understand what it means if it says, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit"'. How can they understand what that means?' So it has used a *dynamic translation*—'sinful nature'. But wait a minute! Would you agree that that's what the term 'flesh' means here? Or, by your 'lower nature' (Phillips)—whatever a lower nature is.

Now we've got to be careful, it seems to me, of things like this. Granted that you will need the term 'flesh'—'You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit'; or 'The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh'—we shall need to understand it and interpret it. But whether it's right to put into the translation so much interpretation that 'flesh' here means your 'sinful nature', or your 'lower nature'—that seems to me to be, at least, a very doubtful practice. You say, 'But if you just leave the word "flesh", people won't understand it.' Perhaps the thing to do then is to put a footnote down at the bottom of the page and say, 'I think the term here means . . .'

When Paul wrote his Epistles and used the word *sarx*, what do you suppose those original Greeks thought it meant? Well, the Greeks who read it would have been a little bit perplexed at what Paul meant by *sarx* here. Therefore, they had to think and compare it with what Paul says elsewhere and then ask him when he came the next time what he meant. Take the phrase, 'Follow after love,' for example (1 Cor 14:1 RV). They translated it by the Latin word *amor*. But people like Saint Augustine thought that was very doubtful, because by that time the word *amor* in Latin meant sexual love, so that wouldn't do. Well, what word would you use for 'love,' then? Even Augustine, great scholar though he was, with a wonderful knowledge of Latin, tried to think up a word that he could use in Latin for 'love' that wouldn't have the wrong connotations. Eventually he decided on the Latin word *caritas* that came over into English as *charity*—'Follow after charity.' That's what the Authorised Version says. In the course of the centuries, however, 'charity' has come to mean giving to the poor, and we can talk about charity being 'as cold as ice'. It wouldn't do now to translate love as charity.

Language that people can understand

There are difficulties in translation, but let's not over exaggerate them. When the early missionaries went to Africa they translated the Greek of the New Testament into Latin. Then they were faced with translating the Old Testament, which was originally written in Hebrew and they didn't know Hebrew. So what they did was to translate the Old Greek translation, the *Septuagint*. There was a Greek translation of the Hebrew and they translated that Greek translation into Latin. In many places the Greek translation was a bit erratic and when it came out into Latin it was most curious! However, God used it to the establishment of hundreds of churches. If you think of our early missionaries going to Timbuktu or somewhere, they needed to translate Scripture into the language. Not knowing Greek or Hebrew, they translated the Authorised Version as best they could and God blessed it.

We mustn't exaggerate the difficulties. On the other hand, we've been talking about translation of holy Scripture and why the versions differ because we want to understand it and we must be as exact as we can be. We have our motives in evangelism, don't we? If we are going to speak to our modern generation, we need to speak in a language that they can understand. Of course, when it comes to technical terms like 'flesh', then we shall have to explain it to them. If you started to talk to me about computers and BlackBerrys, and some people have MP3s—you would do your best to try and make me understand, wouldn't you? When it comes to technical terms, you have to leave the technical terms as they are and explain them, so we must follow that mixture of tactics in our evangelism.

Caution in denouncing modern translations

I want to say one final thing, and this comes back to the difference you will find in translations. I take as an example 1 Timothy 3:16: 'And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness' (KJV). In the next phrase, the Greek manuscripts have different readings. Some say, 'God was manifest in the flesh,' or, 'He who was manifested in the flesh.' Most modern commentators and textual critics would say that the original reading there is not 'God was manifested', but 'He who was manifested.'

The context shows that the one Paul is talking about was God. But there has been an uproar in some circles because many modern translations have put '*He* who was manifested in the flesh', whereas the Authorised has '*God* was manifest in the flesh.' These modern translations have been accused of denying the deity of Christ. As far as I know, they were never intending to deny the deity of Christ, but to be faithful to the manuscripts they judged to be closer to the original. Now, we do have to be very careful, because there has been a shameful denunciation of godly men. Let's hope those who have denounced them didn't really know what they were talking about, for if they did they were guilty of very serious slander.

D. A. Carson, who dealt with some of the slanders brought against modern translations, studied sundry parts in the New Testament where some translations give a translation that refers to God and Christ as two separate persons, and others that translate the Greek as taking both terms, 'God' and 'Christ', to refer to the same person.

For instance, Titus 2:13, 'Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of . . . '—how should the rest be translated? Some translate it as referring to two persons: 'Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God [that's one person] and our Saviour Jesus Christ [that's a second person]'. Whereas the Greek is open to the translation that it refers to one person, 'Looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.' That means that *Jesus Christ is our great God and Saviour*.

There are a number of these passages: John 1 (twice), Acts, Romans, 2 Thessalonians, Titus, Hebrews and 2 Peter, where some translations ascribe deity to Christ by the way they translate and others do not. D. A. Carson has charted how many and how often in these translations they used the translation that applies deity to Christ. Of those that he tested, the highest number belongs to the NIV.⁷

Just because translators honestly follow what they think is the right manuscript in certain places—as in 1 Tim 3:16, 'He who was manifested in the flesh,' as distinct from 'God was manifest in flesh'—that is no ground at all for saying that they deny the deity of Christ. That is sheer nonsense. As I say, if people don't understand what's involved, then perhaps they are to be excused; but if they do know what's involved, they are guilty of a very serious slander. Let's stand for the truth, but I'd be prepared to think that translators on the whole set out to be loyal to what Scripture says. Let us support the missionaries in countries where they have great difficulties in translating, particularly the technical terms of the New Testament, into simple languages that don't even have the basic concepts to put the truth of holy Scripture; they need our prayer and support.

Just let me add that, if I've confused you, at least I've shown that there are complications in this thing. As responsible servants of the living God we ought to acquaint ourselves with some of the questions that arise in this matter of manuscripts; their different readings on the one hand and the best way to translate the Greek on the other.

⁷ See D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.

SESSION 4

A. Questions

The primary part of this study will be devoted to questions. When we run out of questions I shall talk briefly on the matter of the canon of the New Testament.

Question 1

What does 'eclectic text' mean?

ANSWER: The word is an adjective, meaning 'to choose out'; and in textual criticism an eclectic text is the name given to a text that scholars reconstruct on the basis of many different manuscripts. They will follow Manuscript 1 so far, but then if they think Manuscript 2 has a better reading in the next verse they will take the reading from that manuscript. Then, if somewhere else down the line they think that some other manuscript, Manuscript 20, has the best reading there, they will take that reading out of it. They choose from many different manuscripts; they don't just follow one.

The result is that you wouldn't find the text they produce in any one manuscript, because they have chosen from a number of different manuscripts in order to reconstruct their text. That is what *eclectic* means; it stands in distinction from a text that is just copied from one manuscript, or from a majority of manuscripts that all read the same thing practically everywhere.

So some scholars decide to follow certain manuscripts all the way through—whatever they have they will follow the manuscripts. Whereas other scholars don't follow just one manuscript—they choose a reading from this manuscript once and from that manuscript somewhere else. Their text is chosen out from many manuscripts. That is *eclectic*.

Question 2

How do we know that the Word of God is authentic? You have explained it to me over the years, that if the Lord Jesus says something we believe him; he believed that God's Word is true and so on. When I have said anything like that, friends always come back and say, 'You're involved in a circular argument! How would you know what your Lord Jesus says if you hadn't read it in the Bible? And yet you're using him to prove that the Bible is true.'

ANSWER: Yes, logically as you say, that is circular reasoning. You say you know the Lord Jesus said this because it's in the Bible; so you believe that he said it because it's in the Bible. Then

on the other hand you turn around and say that the Bible is true because Jesus is the Son of God. So it sounds to people like circular reasoning.

My first answer to that is—yes it is circular reasoning. Now some circular reasoning is *vicious*, in the old Latin sense—it is faulty, it is a *vicious circle*. But there are circular reasons that are not vicious, that are necessarily true. For instance, how do I know the universe is there? You say, ‘The scientists have made experiments and have shown it’s there.’ O, really? Did they invent it? Was it there before? Well of course they didn’t invent it; it was there before they started to study it. We believe it was there long before the scientists currently studied it. Now they can tell us a lot about it; but because you’re studying the universe, everything that you have about the universe comes from the universe to start with—it must do. If you say, ‘How do you know this scientist is wrong?’, well, you know he’s wrong because if you studied the universe itself rightly, it will show you he’s wrong. He’s misinterpreted it. The universe therefore becomes the final authority on itself. The God of the universe is like that and similarly it’s true of the New Testament.

Yes, you can follow a lot of scientists and what they say is in accordance with the facts of the universe and so you may trust them and come to think that there are atoms. I’ve never seen one myself—but the scientist says it is so and I trust him, and so forth and so on. I’m right to use them and trust them as a secondary authority. But in the end if I say, ‘Where did they get their authority from?’ it has to come from the universe. For example, the early Greek philosophers Leucippus and Democritus invented the atomic theory and came to the conclusion that the things in the universe are formed of atoms that you can’t see. They gave them the name *atom* because they were so tiny you couldn’t split them. They were right in saying all the matter in the universe is made up of atoms, but they were wrong in saying they couldn’t be split. We know they can be. How do we come to know they were wrong? By studying the universe and the universe eventually came up with the evidence that these scientists were wrong.

So now, to apply that by analogy to our Lord. It’s good that you consult John the Baptist and Peter, James and John, the apostles; they will point you to Christ. Not that they were wrong, but ultimately the authority that they have comes from Christ. That’s how our New Testament came to be. That’s why I say it’s not a vicious circle. Listen to what those apostles actually say that Christ said. You must judge yourself whether it’s true or not, when you listen to what he said.

That’s why I made a big point of saying that the central part of the message that we find in the Gospels and in the Epistles is a message that can be traced back to Christ. The apostles didn’t invent it, even though they wrote the account; they will show you that they didn’t invent this story. In fact when they first heard it, they objected to it. Namely, the question of our Lord suffering on the cross and its purpose. Even when they preach it, Paul admits that it is a folly to the Greeks. Paul didn’t invent it, so here is the evidence that it goes back to Christ. It goes back to him before there was any New Testament; the New Testament will tell you that it is their claim.

So, it does appear to the outsider to be a circular argument, but it’s not a vicious circle. Science has to apply many of those circular arguments. The evidence, when looked at, goes

back to Christ. If somebody in a newspaper tomorrow quotes Tony Blair⁸ as having said this, you don't necessarily take it for granted that the paper is giving you a fair report of what he said. You can check it with all sorts of things to see whether or not it came from Blair.

Question 3

Islam has such a high regard of their Scripture, but Muhammad points people to the Qur'an and they debate amongst themselves whether the Qur'an is part of Allah. So there might be a hierarchy of Scripture; but what we're thinking about here is that Christ is way above and beyond Scripture. Scripture is God's word, but is it touched by God? How high are we to put it? We can't think higher than Christ, but how high do we think of Scripture?

ANSWER: Well, yes, that's a very good question. At the philosophical level, Muslims are in a difficult position. They want to say—and I've had them say it to me when I was in Jordan—that the Qur'an is eternal. It existed eternally and it was dictated to Muhammad all at once, but it existed eternally long before Muhammad. Then, of course, philosophically they get themselves in a very difficult position, because now they believe in two eternal things. God and the Qur'an, which contradicts Islamic doctrine that there's only one eternal and that's God.

'What is the difference in Christian thinking?' someone might say. Would you approve of a Christian that put the Bible on a shelf and bowed down and worshipped it? You wouldn't, would you? Of course not! Like creation, the universe didn't always exist; God created it. He himself is eternal, Scripture didn't always exist. God spoke it and had his chosen people record it, but Scripture didn't always exist. We can date the New Testament, for instance, and Old Testament books like Isaiah—it is a record of what God spoke in those times.

Question 4

How much reverence do you need to pay to the actual book as it is God's Word?

ANSWER: Well, if I were talking to a Muslim, I would try to remember his sensibilities and I wouldn't put the Bible on the floor. I wouldn't put another book on top of the Bible because he has that kind of reverence for the Qur'an. Even if he's never read it he will not put it on the floor, he'll never put another book on top of the Qur'an and he thinks that if you believe the Bible is inspired you wouldn't put it on the floor or put another book on top of it. So I would try to remember that.

The extreme for that is, if you gave a Bible to Russians in the 1990s, for instance—when many of them had not seen a Bible all their lives through, because they were forbidden under Marxism—they would have kissed it, put it on the shelf along with the icons, bowed down to it and prayed to it each night; but they wouldn't read it, many of them. That is superstition.

⁸ British Prime Minister at the time of the talk.

We show our reverence for God's word by reading it humbly, asking God for understanding of it and allowing the Lord to speak through it to us. We're not to treat it superstitiously.

Secondly, there is a mistake that we can make in dealing with Scripture. Our Lord pointed it out to the Jews:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39–40)

That is true; many of the Pharisees studied Scripture and they study it still, because they will tell you that studying Scripture is a meritorious deed and the more you study it the more likely you are to get into heaven at last, by dint of the fact you just studied Scripture. Studying Scripture is a way to achieve eternal life. Our Lord made the point to them, 'You search the Scriptures because you think that *in them* you have eternal life,' and in that sense, that is not true. There are many liberal, modernist theologians in universities that study Scripture and they're not believers. Some of them are atheists of course, self-confessed atheists. 'The function of the Scriptures,' says our Lord, 'is that they bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.' It's the Lord Jesus that gives eternal life. I can't get eternal life apart from him, just by studying the Bible as a book.

There was an Irish preacher—I used to enjoy his preaching, because he was quite a theologian in his way, but he was so comical it was difficult not to burst out laughing in the middle of his sermon. I heard him preach on a number of occasions. He used this illustration: Suppose you saw me out in the middle of the country and I was clinging my arms around a signpost. As you halted the car, you think, 'What on earth is he doing, hugging this signpost?' So you stop the car and come over to me and say,

'Hello Gooding. Just interested in what you were doing hugging that signpost.'

'It's obvious, isn't it?' I say. 'Here is Enniskillen—it says so, look—I've got Enniskillen! That's what I wanted when I set out, and now I've got Enniskillen.'

You say, 'So you've got Enniskillen?'

'Yes, and I can tell you how long Enniskillen is; it's got eleven letters in it. That's Enniskillen.'

You would say, 'That's very nice. Tell me, have you been feeling altogether well this last week or two? That isn't Enniskillen—that's a signpost to Enniskillen!'

Scripture is a God-given signpost to Christ and I can't get eternal life without coming to Christ. Some people, like the Pharisees, make that mistake. A lot of academic theology makes a similar mistake. They study Scripture, but they will not come to Christ. On the other hand, Christ says to his disciples when they wouldn't come with him, 'The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (John 6:63).

You say, 'Well how does that fit in with what he said in chapter 5?'

In chapter 5 he is pointing out the folly of those who read Scripture but won't come to Christ, of whom it speaks. In chapter 6 he's saying that his very words that he speaks, they are spirit and they are life. So that God not merely inspired the Gospels, but as we read them Christ speaks to us still. He didn't only speak two thousand years ago and inspire the apostles and the evangelists to write down what he said, God speaks still through his word. When

Christ speaks to our hearts, his words are spirit and they are life. It's a question of developing a balanced attitude.

Question 5

Apart from the King James Version, which do you think would be the best translation to use?

ANSWER: That would be a very difficult question to answer. Apart from the Authorized, get a reasonably modern translation. They vary from towards paraphrase to being literal translations. One of the more reasonable modern ones is the English Standard Version. That tries to bring English up to date, but not give way to too many dynamic translations, as the NIV tends to do. It tries to keep the language moderately sedate and not slang; so the English Standard Version is a good one to read.

That said, of course, if you like a translation that's very vigorous and a bit of a paraphrase, because it helps you to get the feeling of the thing by all means read it. When it comes to deciding your doctrine, use a translation that is much more literal. In the NIV, if you come across a new thought that you didn't know existed before and this seems marvellous—when it comes to doctrine, a wise thing to do is to check it by reading some much more literal translation.

B. The Canon of the New Testament

Now I want to say just one or two words about the other question that our topics today raise, and that is the question of *The Canon of the New Testament*. In popular language this refers to the books of the New Testament—how many books should be regarded as forming the New Testament. The difference between those books that are regarded as forming the New Testament and books that are not regarded as being worthy to put into the canon of the New Testament, and that's a very large subject.

The same question comes up in the Old Testament. Who decides what books should be in the Old Testament, and should the so-called Apocrypha be part of the Old Testament or not? There's a similar problem with the New Testament, though many Christians are not aware of it. There are many Apocryphal books in addition to the New Testament and I brought along two weighty volumes to let you see how many there are. All sorts of Gospels—of Thomas and Peter and Nicodemus and many more. There's a New Testament Apocrypha as well as the Old Testament Apocrypha. Therefore, how do we decide and who decides which books should be regarded as belonging to the canon of the New Testament and which books not?

The first thing we have to observe is that there is no verse in the whole of the New Testament that says when the New Testament is complete. It does not lay down the extent of the canon, or who decided what books should be in it. Here we must notice a very fundamentally important thing. It was not the Church that put books in the canon and thereby conferred authority on them. It wasn't, to put it another way, being in the canon that conferred authority on the New Testament books. It was the opposite way round; books were regarded as being in the canon because of the authority they possessed before they were put into the canon. That is a very important thing; it's important in our witness because some people will tell you that it is the Church that gave us the New Testament. That is not true. It's not the Church that gave us the New Testament. It was God, through the apostles and the evangelists—the Gospel writers—that gave us the New Testament.

It is, therefore, exceedingly important and absolutely fundamental to get this thing straight. It was not being put into the canon that conferred authority on the New Testament books; it was the other way round. The books gained their way and acceptance because of their inherent authority and being widely regarded by Christian people as authoritative documents. They were then put into a list of accepted books—what we now call *the canon*.

The question comes up, therefore: How soon did the Christians come to accept this particular list of books, such as we now have in the New Testament—how soon did they come to agree on this matter? They answer to that is—not all at once. Of course, books written by the apostles were accepted, or books written by some people that were fellow workers of the apostles. So Matthew was an apostle, John was an apostle; Mark wasn't an apostle, but by tradition he is associated with Peter and perhaps rightly so; Luke was a travel companion of Paul's. There are letters by Paul, John, Peter, James and Jude; James was a brother of the Lord Jesus. So, largely speaking then, it was who they came from, by way of being apostles or so forth and the inherent authority of what they said, that eventually secured their place in the canon.

That is why I showed you early manuscripts that lead you into a stage when people were beginning to collect the epistles of Paul into one volume. That of course took some time. Then, I showed you the earliest surviving copy of the first time that all four Gospels were printed in one volume and so on—again that took time.

I'm not going now to discuss how soon we have evidence of Christians agreeing on our present list of books. It was quite early on that you begin to find lists of Bible books, New Testament books, being talked about in literature. Some books were disputed for a while, but there's no evidence that any book, once accepted, was turned out of the canon. At the time of the Reformation, Luther, for instance, didn't like the Epistle of James, though it was in the canon. He had his own reasons for it, of course. He called it an epistle of straw and other such derogatory terms.

I recommend to you two books:

Prof. Bruce's *The Books and the Parchments*, which discusses at length the question of the canonicity, both of the New Testament and of the Old.

The much more scholarly work by Bruce Metzger, which was written for the Christian public, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. He was an evangelical believer in his youth and continued to be a believer all his life. He believed, for instance, in the literal, historical ascension of Christ and wrote about it in his technical articles. He adhered firmly to inspiration and the canon of the New Testament and discusses the question at great length in the latest edition of his book (p. 254).

The canon of the Old Testament is an important thing and I bewail the present movement of evangelicals who want to say that you should include the Apocrypha in the canon. That seems to me to be a serious matter, because one of the Old Testament Apocryphal books asserts that it is a good thing to pray for the dead, that they might be released from their torments. That fits in well with the purgatory and praying for the dead that you will find in the Roman Catholic Church and with the superstitions that you hear almost every week, when prayer is offered for people who have been killed or blown up by a bomb, or something. So sometimes the very foundation of the gospel is at stake.

I have brought along these two hefty volumes of the New Testament Apocrypha; nowadays you'll find the public talking as though we Christians never knew about them. So, we get this 'new' *Gospel of Judas* and the BBC tells us that it will alter the very basis of the Christian gospel; give a completely different interpretation and somewhat destroy the traditional view of Christianity. As though the discovery of this thing was such news that nobody ever knew about before and now it represents a very serious question and challenges the basis of the Christian faith. That's absolute nonsense; we have known for centuries of New Testament Apocryphal books galore. We can discern and know what was the motivation behind the writing of them and distinguish what were good and sensible books in their day—comments on Scripture by well-meaning people.

Then there were superstitious books, such as would tell you that when our Lord was a child and he was playing with the other children, one day he made mud pies, like kids do. They all moulded birds out of the mud and Jesus' bird flew away. Isn't that nice! Infantile, I should think. As though the Son of God used his miraculous power to make a nice toy. Well,

any writing that has that kind of thing is immediately shown to be spurious—late, superstitious and so forth. There is no miracle in the New Testament of any such kind.

Then we are long since aware of what I call the gnostic writings, the writings of Gnosticism. In 1945 a whole lot of gnostic writings were discovered in Egypt; they were called the Nag Hammadi writings. These are gnostic books. We've known of it for years and we know what Gnosticism is and was. The early Christians in the second and third centuries knew all about Gnosticism, so it's nothing new. But the public don't know it; so when the Gospel of Judas suddenly comes to light they tell you that this is going to upset Christianity.

Then there's the *Da Vinci Code*. Some people think it's a very good novel—well, opinions differ, don't they? It struck me as being simple. There's a most exciting thing in nearly every chapter and all sorts of impossible things happen. If you like that kind of a yarn, go for it, I suppose! When the author, Dan Brown, talks about the Christian Church having suppressed all sorts of doctrines from the gnostic gospels because they were afraid it would upset Christianity, he's talking absolute piffle! People like to believe it, don't they?

The same thing was said about the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was rumoured that the Catholic Church had sat on the Dead Sea Scrolls and not allowed them to be published, because among the scrolls there were some that would have proved Christianity wrong. Now it is true that the professor from Harvard, James Cross Jr, took an extraordinarily long while publishing some of the contents of Cave 4; so that in the end the scholarly world revolted against him and demanded that the scrolls be given to other scholars who would get them out to the public. That is quite true and I know some of the goings on behind the scenes that led to that explosion among the scholars. The man who was then appointed as chairman of the editors of the Dead Sea scrolls, Emanuel Tov, has been a personal friend of mine for many years; I knew him as a student in his student days. The idea that the Catholic Church tried to suppress them because they contain doctrines that would have contradicted Christianity is absolute nonsense, but people love conspiracy theories. I could tell you how it all happened and what processes were involved in forcing the hand of those scholars to publish the rest quickly. It had nothing to do with manuscripts that would have destroyed Christianity.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.