

Why I Believe the Bible: A Letter to a Friend

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Preface

This document was originally a response to a friend from a different faith who had asked me why I believed the Bible. I have removed certain parts of the response that were appropriate for a personal letter to a friend but not for wider dissemination. I also removed those parts that were specifically relevant to his religious background as I think their inclusion here would be distracting. Even so, this document retains the tone of a correspondence, as that context was what ultimately drove my writing. I think the (slightly modified) letter will still be useful to anyone interested in biblical defense or who wonders why Christians put so much trust in an ancient book.

Brother,

I apologize for this late (by a year) response to your question about why I believe the Bible to be the word of God. As a reminder, here is the relevant portion of our conversation from last January.

[Friend]: I would be interested in knowing why you consider the Bible to be the word of God, do we have good historical evidence that any of the gospels were actually written by the people that they are attributed to. From what I've learnt, gospels themselves do not claim to be written by such individuals, they are anonymous

Gabe: Now that's a wonderful question that is far too heavy for WhatsApp messaging. Do you mind if I spend some time on that one and send you my answer in an attachment?

[Friend]: Absolutely...take all the time you need... I would love to hear your take on this

I could offer a plethora of factors contributing to the delay, but in the end, they would just be excuses. As I began writing this, I intended to format it as a letter. However, as it grew in length, I found it necessary to add section headings to better organize my thoughts and make topic groups clearer. I hope that the formatting does not make the content seem too dry or academic since I try to live my life by the Bible's revitalizing instruction and wisdom.

Introduction

Technically, there are two questions that I have left unanswered; namely, "why Gabe believes the Bible" and "how do we know who wrote the Gospels". I am going to start by addressing the first question, but in the process of attempting to answer it, I think I will also be giving some attention to the second. Throughout the remainder of this document, please remember that in no instance is it my intention to be offensive in any way and that (as I have before told you in Patterson) my understanding of Biblical doctrines leads me to earnestly believe that the "fruit" (to use a Christian term) you display in your life – specifically your kindness, joy, and desire to do good – are an evidence of a heart touched and blessed by God. However, the significance of the topic at hand cannot be understated, and I would be in the wrong should I fail to fully explore the foundations of my faith.

Thought Process Behind My Writing

As I have prepared to construct my answer, it has occurred to me that this will be a considerably easier and shorter apologia to write given your background and beliefs than it would be if I were conversing with an atheist. One of the things I always enjoy about our conversations is the common ground from which we can commence our discussions. Because of our overlapping knowledge of the 'patriarchs' (*i.e.* Adam, Moses, David, etc.) and our faiths' similar elucidation of morality and the nature of God, I never felt as though I was in a true doctrinal 'battlefield'. Obviously, we hold very different beliefs about some very important things, but the light sparring that have had thus far has never seemed unpleasant. I hope that that reads as I intended it; essentially, I am more comfortable explaining why I believe the Bible is God's word than I would be explaining why I believe that there is a God and that He has a word. In that context, many of my reasons for believing the Bible is God's word that would be critical in a discussion with an atheist or agnostic seem redundant here, but for completeness I will give overview of the whole¹ before narrowing in on a subset that I think is more relevant to our conversation. Very little of what is below is original to me, but I try to provide sources for further reading whenever appropriate.

¹ If I had to recommend only one book on the reliability of the Bible, it would be *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell. It is an updated combination of what was originally two volumes. I have yet to read the whole book, but from what I have read, I am sure it covers most if not all of what I say here in more detail with better quality. The book also has an *extensive* bibliography for additional reading. McDowell is a Christian apologist and preacher who is the author or co-author of over 150 books. He was originally an atheist who set out to prove the Bible to be a collection of myths and exaggerations; he was unsuccessful in that goal.

General Biblical Defense

If I had to explain why I believe the Bible to someone on an elevator in the time it took to get to the next floor, I would use the following.

I choose to believe the Bible because it is a reliable collection of historical documents, written by eyewitnesses during the lifetime of other eyewitnesses. They report supernatural events that took place in fulfillment of specific prophecies and claim that their writings are divine rather than human in origin.

That is a quote from a preacher named Voddie Baucham. Here is the link for a video of a lecture he gave entitled “Why you can believe the Bible”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1XJ7DeR5fc>. The above quote is at 11:07, and he starts unpacking where the different parts of the argument come from around 13:30. It is a great lecture that gives a very concise defense of Biblical reliability. I am actually going to use most of his points in this section as I give a general framework for my belief in the Bible before going into more detail below.

The Bible is a unique religious text. In its continuity, the Bible is the only book that was written

1. Over ~1400 year span
2. By over 40 authors from every walk of life
 - a. e.g. kings, fishermen, shepherds, scholars, peasants, statesmen
3. In different places
 - a. e.g. wilderness, dungeon, palace, traveling
4. At different times
 - a. e.g. war, peace, prosperity, desolation
5. During different moods
 - a. e.g. joy, sorrow, conviction, confusion
6. On three continents
 - a. Asia, Africa, Europe
7. In three languages
 - a. Mostly Greek and Hebrew, but there is some Aramaic in the Old Testament
8. In a variety of literary styles
 - a. e.g. poetry, historical narrative, law, allegory, personal correspondence, biography
9. To address hundreds of controversial subjects in harmony despite the multitude of authors
 - a. e.g. marriage, character, parenting, the nature of God, obedience to authority
10. And to present the single, unfolding story of God’s redemption of human beings. Although the Bible contains many books by many authors, it shows in its **continuity** that it is also *one* book.

The above is a general defense of the Bible as a whole, but there are specific defenses for the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). Bernard Ramm speaks of the accuracy and number of biblical manuscripts.

“Jews preserved it as no other manuscript has ever been preserved. With their massora (parva, magna, and jinalis) they kept tabs on every letter, syllable, word and paragraph. They had special classes of men within their culture whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit these documents with practically perfect fidelity-scribes, lawyers, massorettes. Whoever counted the letters and syllables and words of Plato or Aristotle? Cicero or Seneca?” (Ramm, PCE’53, 230-231)

Major supports to the OT reliability and inspiration are textual transmission or accuracy of copying process (as seen most spectacularly in the Dead Sea Scrolls), archeological evidence, multiple references to OT events in the NT, and the NT fulfillment of OT prophecies. Because the OT partially rests on the reliability and inspiration of the NT,

I'm going to mainly focus on the NT since its accuracy is more important to Christianity doctrine (not to say that the OT is unimportant), and I think it will be what interests you most.

New Testament Defense

Other than perhaps archeological evidence, there is more defense for the NT than for the OT since the NT was the most recently written and has more textual evidence available. To start with, it was a very important point to the NT authors that what they were testifying was verifiable by eyewitnesses (emphasis mine in following verses).

1. **2 Peter 1:16-21** For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.
2. **Luke 1:1-4** Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.
3. **1 John 1:1-3** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.
4. **Acts 1:3** To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.
5. **1 Corinthians 15:4-7** And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

The evangelism of the Apostles, the persecution of the early church, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD resulted in early Christians being spread throughout the Roman Empire (and likely further). Thus, since the Gospels and letters in the NT were widely circulated among early churches, if the NT books had originally contained errors they would have been quickly contradicted or corrected by those who were eyewitness to the same events and could testify to the truth. On the contrary, many early Christians were martyred (even before the NT was written) for refusing to deny the same message found in the NT. According to early Christian tradition, of the 11 original apostles (not counting the traitor Judas here), all but John were martyred (six by crucifixion) - yet not one recanted their beliefs to save their lives.

Furthermore, not all the eyewitness were Christians or even friendly to their cause.

First of all, eyewitnesses of the events in question were still alive when the tradition had been completely formed; and among those eyewitnesses were bitter enemies of the new religious movement. Yet the tradition claimed to narrate a series of well-known deeds and publicly taught doctrines at a time when false statements could, and would, be challenged. - Lawrence McGinley²

The book of Acts records multiple accounts where the apostles would be preaching and would appeal to the common knowledge of the audience, e.g. "...as ye yourselves also know" (Acts 2:22). They would base their claims on falsifiable facts in the presences of hostile witnesses – who would not refute them.

² *Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives*, 1944, pg 25 (in *More than a Carpenter* by McDowell)

Finally, I would like to address directly the concept of the Bible (specifically the NT) being a corrupted or altered version of what was *once* God’s word. Below is a table of various ancient works (including the NT) with when the earliest copies are from and how many there are. It is clear that no major ancient work comes close to having the textual reliability of the NT.

AUTHOR	BOOK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	TIME GAP	NO. OF COPIES
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 B.C.	c. 400 B.C.	c. 400 yrs.	643
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480–425 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,350 yrs.	8
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460–400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	8
Plato		400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	7
Demosthenes		300 B.C.	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,400 yrs.	200
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100–44 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,000 yrs.	10
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 B.C.–A.D. 17	4th cent. (partial) mostly 10th cent.	c. 400 yrs. c. 1,000 yrs.	1 partial 19 copies
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	A.D. 100	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,000 yrs.	20
Pliny Secundus	<i>Natural History</i>	A.D. 61–113	c. A.D. 850	c. 750 yrs.	7
New Testament		A.D. 50–100	c. 114 (fragment) c. 200 (books) c. 250 (most of N.T.) c. 325 (complete N.T.)	+ 50 yrs. 100 yrs. 150 yrs. 225 yrs.	5366

From McDowell, pg. 38

In addition to early copies or translations of the NT, the quotations of early church fathers (~100-300 AD) are so numerous (*tens of thousands*) and widespread (from every book in the NT) that even if no manuscripts of the NT were available, almost half of NT could be reproduced from the writings of the early fathers alone³. The explosion of copies and early translations (unusual for ancient works) during the lifetime of eyewitnesses (or in the generation after) gives no opportunity for either negligence or maliciousness to have altered the message (or even the verbiage) of the original books or letters. The only way the Bible could have been corrupted on such a grand scale is if someone early in Christian history had the authority and the power to recall all the texts and commentaries⁴ on the

³ 46% to be precise. A common NT myth is that only 11 verses are missing from early church literature, which would be cool if it were true, but unnecessary for another layer of NT verification. In the 46% the early church fathers did quote, they authenticate the major points of the apostles’ writings. From just the non-canonical works of Ignatius and Polycarp (students of the Apostle John) and the non-canonical work of Clement (a student of Apostle Paul) we see the following affirmed: Jesus was predicted by the OT; Jesus was born of a virgin; Jesus is divine; Jesus taught his disciples; Jesus worked miracles; Jesus lived, ministered, was crucified and died; and Jesus rose from the dead and demonstrated His deity. All these points are, of course, also in the NT, but the writings of the men who sat at the feet of the apostles and learned from the apostolic eyewitness accounts provide strong evidence that the thousands of surviving NT manuscripts are authentic.

⁴ This would really be the hardest part. Not only would someone have to change the original message, but they would also have to rewrite thousands of pages on commentary on the original message.

texts, destroy them, and issue official copies (in the same languages as what was being replaced), which would certainly result in complaints and resistance. Yet no such person or record of events has ever existed.

Given the great number of manuscripts, letters, and commentaries a deliberate subversion (or even simple negligence) would have involved, as well as the extent of the geography they covered, it is inconceivable that such an undertaking would have been effective – in either tracking down all the copies or making all the necessary changes in those copies to be believable. To me this is one of the great beauties of the Bible; no doctrine hangs on one, two, or a dozen verses. The central aspects of the Christian faith can be found throughout every book of the NT (which all harmonize together), and there are pictures and prophecies of these things throughout the OT. The Bible is constructed in such a way as to be impervious to tampering by man or demon⁵. By most estimates, all of the NT was written sometime between 50-100 AD (see table to right), which means there is not enough time between the NT events and the recording of them for facts to change into legends, as could be reasonably expected of other ancient literature; all this is in the context of Jewish culture where it was important that a teacher’s actual words be carefully preserved and passed down.

Here is one last point that I include for completeness given that it is important for a truly objective examination of NT reliability. There are many non-Christian writings from the first few centuries AD that support the NT narrative. There are quotes from several Roman and Jewish authors available to me at the moment (including ones from Tacitus or Josephus in the 1st century and Suetonius or Lucian in the 2nd century), but I will provide only one here. The following is a quote from a letter Pliny the Younger (a Roman author and administrator) sent to Emperor Trajan in about 112 AD (Trajan’s reply to Pliny has also been preserved).

They (Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food-but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. (Pliny the Younger, L, 10:96)

New Testament Authorship

If NT manuscripts are authentic and accurate (as discussed above), the authorship of most of the NT books (mainly the epistles) can be known from the opening salutations⁶. The Gospels, Acts, Hebrews, and 1-3 John do not start

CONSERVATIVE DATING		
<i>(In some cases [e.g. Matthew’s Gospel], now being revised as not conservative enough)</i>		
Paul’s Letters	A.D. 50-66	(Hiebert)
Matthew	A.D. 70-80	(Harrison)
Mark	A.D. 50-60	(Harnak)
	A.D. 58-65	(T. W. Manson)
Luke	early 60s	(Harrison)
John	A.D. 80-100	(Harrison)
LIBERAL DATING		
<i>(In some cases, proven to be impossible [e.g. John’s Gospel]; in others, rarely accepted by competent scholars today)</i>		
Paul’s Letters	A.D. 50-100	(Kümmel)
Matthew	A.D. 80-100	(Kümmel)
Mark	A.D. 70	(Kümmel)
Luke	A.D. 70-90	(Kümmel)
John	A.D. 170	(Baur)
	A.D. 90-100	(Kümmel)

From McDowell, pg. 52

⁵ A fact that should be expected given the infinite wisdom of God.

⁶ e.g. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout...”, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes...”, “Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them...”, “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints...”

with self-naming salutations⁷, although it can be deduced that Luke and Acts share an author based on to whom the books are addressed⁸; it is my understanding that in Christian tradition the authorship of these books (and confirmation of the books with named salutations) is provided by the writings of early church fathers and historians such as Justin the Martyr (100-165 AD), Irenaeus (c130-202 AD), Origen (c184-c253 AD), or Eusebius (c262-c340 AD). For example, the following is from Irenaeus.

Matthew, indeed, produced his gospel written among the Hebrews...Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also transmitted to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. And Luke, the companion of Paul, committed to writing the gospel preached by him, I.e. Paul. Afterwards John the disciple of our Lord, the same that lay upon his bosom, also published the gospel, while he was yet at Ephesus in Asia.

Clement (c35-99 AD), in his letter to the Corinthian church in c96 AD, quotes from the letters of Paul and from the Gospels (although he does name which one). Athanasius (367 AD) gives the earliest list of NT books that is exactly like our present NT.

Again, it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are the four gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Afterwards the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles, seven, of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order...And besides, the Revelation of John.

Related to Biblical authorship is the topic of canonicity. From the writings of biblical and church history, we can discern at least five principles that guided the recognition and collection of inspired books into the NT (and OT) canon⁹.

1. Was the book written by a prophet of God? And did what was prophesied occur?
2. Was the writer confirmed by acts of God?
3. Did the message tell the truth about God? That is, did the message contradict recognized writings?
4. Did it come with the power of God? If the delivery of a message included the presence of God's transforming power, it was seen as a strong indication that the book had His stamp of approval.
5. Was it accepted by the people of God? When a book was received, collected, read, and used by the people of God as the Word of God, it is regarded as canonical. The people in the best position to know the inspiration of a book are those believers who were contemporary with its authorship.

[Deleted Section]

Final Thoughts

The Bible has dire warnings at its beginning, middle, and end for anyone who would tamper with it.

1. **Deuteronomy 4:2** Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.
2. **Psalms 138:2** I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.
3. **Proverbs 30:6** Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.

⁷ 2 John and 3 John both start with "The elder unto the ___", but the letters don't explicitly say who "the elder" is.

⁸ Compare Luke 1:3-4 with Acts 1:1-2.

⁹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 1968/1986, in McDowell. Geisler and Nix described OT and NT canon thusly "A book is not the Word of God because it is accepted by the people of God. Rather the people of God accepted it because it is the Word of God. That is, God gives the book its divine authority, not the people of God. They merely recognize the divine authority which God gives to it."

4. **Revelation 22:18-19** For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

I believe God has both miraculously given *and* preserved His word so that throughout the ages¹⁰ His people might have knowledge of Him, instruction, comfort, and hope and that the wicked might have no excuse of ignorance¹¹. While I do not believe the Bible teaches that access to and belief in the Gospel/Bible is a prerequisite for eternal salvation¹², I believe that it contains truth that leads one closer to God and comfort that makes a wicked world bearable. Ultimately, however, because I believe in Jesus, I believe in the Bible - not the other way around. The fact of the matter is, if we come at Jesus from a critical historical perspective, using only 1st or 2nd century extra-biblical resources, I could conclude that Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and claimed to be God. Before the NT was written, people claimed to be a Christian (and many died) because they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. They were still Christians, even before they believed anything about the NT.

As you and I are blessed to be well educated with extensive experience in academic writing, the lack of traditional literary references in this letter may seem odd, especially given its format and tone (I tried to make it more casual for the first page or so, but eventually gave up). However, I did not want to reinvent completely the wheel given how many superior apolagias are available. If there is anything in particular on which you would like additional information, please let me know and I will provide references or more details. That said, McDowell probably covers most of the above in *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, which is a scholarly work (it actually began as lecture notes) with an extensive bibliography. It would be my first recommendation if you would like to follow references on a particular line of thought.

Closing

I hope this letter finds all well with you and yours. [Remainder removed]

In the hope of heaven,

Gabe

¹⁰ Psalms 12:6 The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.

¹¹ Although even then would the atheist 'should have known better'. As it is said in the Psalms, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard" (Ps 19:1-3). Truly, "the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God" (Ps 53:1).

¹² If that were the case, there are millions if not billions of people who would have no hope of heaven simply because of where or when they lived.