TODAY'S ORDER OF WORSHIP

Welcome by: Bobby Rader / Opening Prayer by: Don Taylor
Morning Assembly Song Leader: Danny Balch

#869 We're Marching to Zion
#882 No Tears in Heaven

Scripture Reading by: Parker Balch
#350 When My Love to Christ Grows Weak

Communion Devotional by:
Lord's Supper and Contribution

#851 I'll Fly Away
Sermon: "Beyond Doubt"
John 20:24-28

#911 Bring Christ Your Broken Life
#870 Beyond This Land of Parting
Closing Prayer by: Jerry Mallernee

Daniel Balch's small group will meet today at
5:00 p.m. at the building

Other Opportunities For Spiritual Growth

Sunday: 9:00am — Bible Study Classes, 10:00am — Worship, 5:00pm — Worship
Wednesday: 6:30pm — Bible Study Classes

Feb. 2, 2025

"Stand Firm in…Liberty"

Galatians 5:1

Trust the Bible?

I randomly came across an interesting article in a Facebook post this week where I learned that the supposed Icelandic translation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, first published in 1901, was discovered in 2014 to not be a translation at all. Instead, it was more like fan fiction: the author had taken the gist of the story, changed a good bit, and come out with something completely different. And then I noted, in response, several people had so cleverly commented with some version of, "sounds a lot like the Bible."

Of course, that was not surprising; it's common to hear claims that there are all sorts of mistakes in the manuscripts and that the Bible cannot be trusted. If you have ever heard those sorts of arguments and wondered about them, let's try to clear things up a bit.

Essentially, this is the science of textual criticism, a very specialized, technical aspect of Biblical studies (that we are going to keep as non-technical as possible to grasp the problem). It boils down to the fact that we do not possess any original copies of NT manuscripts; they have long since turned to dust or at least been lost in the mists of time. In the 1st century, the books that now make up NT were sent to their particular destinations; likely, they were read there and then copied so that others could learn from them too. Those copies were then distributed to other churches, and then copies were made of the copies, etc.

When you are making handwritten copies, it is inevitable that there are differences that arise. Most of those are entirely accidental, because people make mistakes. Other differences might be deliberate. There could be attempts to smooth out grammatical difficulties, or one passage could be influenced by your knowledge of a similar passage, things like that. As a result, over the years, hundreds—more likely, thousands—of variant readings arose. The variant readings might be copied, because we are making copies of copies; eventually, then, these different texts tend to form distinctive, regional families. This becomes even more complex with translations into numerous other languages in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. For 1,500 years, the manuscripts of NT books were passed down in these handwritten copies, until the first printed Greek NT, by Erasmus, came off the press in 1516. Erasmus compared manuscripts and ancient versions to decide on a standard text, but he relied on rather late ones, from one family. So starting in the 19th century, scholars began to compare more of these manuscripts—and we have only found more and more since then. Textual criticism, then, is all about sifting through these manuscripts, comparing the variant readings, and trying to establish what the author originally wrote.

Scholars use a variety of criteria to try to determine the authentic text, and to go into detail on that is beyond the scope of such a brief article. But the real point for us is, knowing the problem, can we trust that what we have in our hands is the Bible?

When we hear the raw numbers sometimes spewed out of mistakes in the manuscripts, it can definitely cause us to doubt. In talking about variants, the most trivial changes count; even when all manuscripts except one say one thing, that lone reading counts as a variant. The best estimate is there are 3-400,000 textual variants in the manuscripts—and there are only about 140,000 words in NT. In other words, there are 2-3 variants for every word in Greek text. Just hearing that in isolation would lead anyone to despair!

Family News & Notes

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH YOUR CHURCH FAMILY

Our Sick

Staci Lunceford Copeland has been placed on hospice.

Continued Prayers
(Need cards, phone calls & visits)

Steve Ward, Caitlin Smith, Virginia Cole, Ken Coleman, Joe Edd Stifflemire, Donna Wilson, Jo Ella McKewen, Oscar Cantu, Jennifer Stelly, Steve Ward, Geri Cryer, Gloria McKelroy, Scott Overton, Rickey Lucas, Debbie Lynn

Shut Ins
(Need cards, phone calls & visits)

Jim Smith, Catherine Parker, Peggy McIntosh, Lois Watts, Willo Dean Ellis

Our Missionaries

Aaron & Marisa Bailey in Montepuez, Mozambique , Rod Kyle in the South Pacific, Mani Pagidopali in India

Upcoming Activities

Elders, Minister meet Monday, Feb. 3rd at 3:00 p.m.

We will have a Houston Food Bank truck on Tuesday, Feb. 4th at 8:00 a.m.

Elders, Deacons, Minister meet Monday, Feb. 10th at 6:30 p.m.

Sympathy

We extend our to Craig Girard and his family on the passing of his stepfather, Dr. Hugo Thomas. He passed away last week.

Elders	Deacons	Minister
Bobby Rader	Daniel Balch	Bryant Perkins
Don Taylor	Danny Balch	
Robert Ward	Walden David	
	Gus Tristan	

"Stand Firm in…Liberty"

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But there are a couple of things to consider. First, the reason we have a lot of variants is we have a lot of manuscripts. No other work from the ancient world even comes close. Several ancient authors have only one copy of their writing in existence, and in some cases, that lone copy was not produced until a thousand years later. Now in that case, there are no variants by definition—with one manuscript, there can't be! But would a single, late manuscript give us confidence that it was the same as the original? You see, to talk about the number of variants without also mentioning the number of manuscripts is misleading; we need to put that number in context. In Greek alone, there are more than 5,600 manuscripts today. Many of these, especially the oldest ones, are fragments; even so, the average Greek NT manuscript is over 450 pages long. In total, there are 2.6 million pages of texts and hundreds of witnesses for every book. When you add in early translations, we have about 20,000 handwritten manuscripts of the NT. And even if those were all destroyed, we still have the commentaries of the Church Fathers; if all other sources of the NT were destroyed, we could reconstruct the text from their quotes!

Now, to be fair, those numbers all risk being a bit overwhelming and misleading, too. More important than the raw numbers are the dates: there are 124 extant manuscripts from within the first 300 years of composition; the whole NT text is found in the collection multiple times. How does the average classical author stack up to that? Well within that same time frame—the first 300 years—there are literally no literary remains. There are 10 manuscripts of Caesar's *Gallic War*, all from the 10th century or later; there are only 2 of Tacitus' *Histories* and *Annals,* one from 9th, one from 11th. In short, the NT is by far the best-attested literary work from the ancient world—it is staggering.

This wealth of manuscripts, you see, presents both the problem and the solution. The copies do not all agree, so the more there are, the more variants you find. On the other hand, the more there are, the more you can determine the control version. It tends to be a sort of self-correcting process in that sense. A lot of people think the transmission of NT is like the telephone game—that's the view reflected in those Facebook comments. But its not like that for a variety of reasons, most importantly that there are multiple streams of transmission that we can compare across different places, times, lines of genealogy. And we can thus know with a great deal of certainty what is and is not original.

That leads to a second point: we have to consider the nature of these variants. The vast majority—as many as 75%—are spelling differences. Most of the rest are either not viable—they are nonsense—or else they are found in only one manuscript. Sometimes both things are true at once. For instance, in **1 Thessalonians 2:7** a lone medieval scribe accidentally changed a single letter in one word so that Paul now says of he and Silas that *we were horses among you.* That's a variant! But it's clearly not what the text originally said. Fully 99% of all of these variants are like that, either not meaningful or not viable.

That means less than 1% of all textual variants are meaningful and viable: they change the meaning of the text to some extent and are at least plausible. And that's where textual criticism comes in; it has important work to do. But even here, most remarkable of all, of this 1%, **none** would change any Christian doctrine. F.F. Bruce summed it up this way in his book *The NT Docs: Are They Reliable*? "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice" All this adds up to the fact that text of Scripture has been faithfully preserved; what we have is what was originally written.

Bryant Perkins