Know What You Believe!

Part 1: God and the Bible

Sam A. Smith
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Introduction

What we believe is called, our “doctrine.” And of course, our beliefs ought to be shaped by what the Bible says, or reasonably implies is true. A categorical study of the major truths of the Bible is usually referred to as Bible doctrine, or biblical theology. The distinguishing feature of biblical theology is that it focuses on core truths, and how those truths are related.

The possibility of knowing anything about God, his plans, and purposes

Is it really possible to know anything about God and his plans and purposes? According to the Bible, the answer is, “Yes.” In fact, the message of the Bible presupposes that man can obtain and comprehend at least some knowledge of God and his acts, purposes, and plans. While it’s more detailed than our present study will allow us to develop, the possibility of knowing anything about God and his plans and purposes is built upon three foundational truths. Those truths are:

1. Theism: that God exists
2. Revelation: that God has spoken
3. Epistemology: that it is possible for man to know truth

It’s interesting that Satan has always attacked on these three fronts in his spiritual warfare against both God and man. He seeks to deny that God is, that God has spoken, or that man can be certain of what God has said. Incidentally, it was in each of these three areas that Satan aimed his first attack upon mankind. He attacked first in the area of epistemology (i.e., the “knowability” of truth) in Genesis 3:1, when he attempted to create doubt in Eve’s mind as to whether her understanding of the divine command against eating the fruit was factually correct. Failing in that attack, he then turned to two other tactics: outright contradiction of the divine revelation (3:4), and disparagement of God’s motives (3:5). Implying that Eve could become like God was an implicit denial of God’s eternality and holiness. These are still the principal means he uses today to foster rebellion against God.

Why it’s important to know what you believe

There are many reasons for developing a systematic understanding of biblical truth. Here are just four of those reasons:

1. We can deal with organized, categorized information far more efficiently than with disorganized information.

2. Organization in itself has informational content, in that it shows relationships between parts, and thus imparts new capacities to bare facts.

3. Certain truths are difficult, or impossible to understand in isolation. For example, election only makes sense in light of total depravity; impeccability is incomprehensible apart from the hypostatic union of Christ’s divine and human natures in one person; inerrancy is dependant upon inspiration, the doctrine of the rapture of the Church presumes premillennialism and an understanding of the uniqueness of the Church.
4. Systemization contributes to more effective memory, communication, application, and defense of biblical truth.

Here are a few important things to keep in mind regarding biblical theology.

1. The revelation of truth was progressive.

That is to say, God progressively, over time, revealed more and more of what he wanted man to know about himself, about his creation, and about his purposes and plans for his creation. Understandably, God began with simple concepts and progressed to the more complex truths. Because of the progressive nature of the revelation of truth, it is often necessary to follow the development of a theological concept in order to understand how all the pieces fit together. One of the biggest pitfalls in the study of biblical truth is trying to understand the more highly developed truths without first understanding the more basic concepts. Since the basic concepts are usually taught first, it's important to understand Old Testament truths before tackling New Testament truths. The biggest reason so many people are confused about the meaning of the New Testament is because they have little understanding of the Old Testament. To illustrate: the “gospel” is the “good news” (that’s literally what “gospel” means), but it’s hard to fully appreciate the good news if one hasn’t first heard the bad news!

2. Our knowledge of truth is incomplete.

While God has revealed many things to us, he hasn’t revealed everything; in fact, not only has he not revealed everything about everything, he hasn’t even revealed everything about anything! We could get frustrated over the fragmentary nature of our knowledge, but doing so wouldn’t help very much. We have to be content with what is obvious (i.e., self-evident), and what God has revealed, and what we can properly infer (logically “figure out,” or “deduce”) from what we know. Our knowledge isn’t going to be complete in this present life, but even incomplete knowledge can be immensely helpful. We don’t need to know everything about something in order to know something. For example, I’m not an engineer, and I don’t know how a microprocessor works at the physical level, but I was able to use a computer to produce this text, and that was very useful! The fact is, not only do we not have complete knowledge of any theological truth, we don’t have complete knowledge of anything at all. Nevertheless, everything we learn helps us to some degree or another, at some time or another, and God has given us all that we need to know for now.

3. Biblical theology makes use of both “induction” and “deduction.”

This was mentioned above, but it merits special consideration. Induction is information that is either self-evident, or given (categorical statements of truth in the Bible are examples of truth that can be known by induction; for example: Christ is coming back). Deduction is new information that can be derived from what is self-evident, or what is given; for example: Since Christ is coming back (given, because he told us), we need to be ready (an inference, or deduction). In theology, induction is what the Bible plainly
states. On the other hand, deduction involves understanding what the Bible implies by what it says. Both induction and deduction are equally valid forms of knowledge as long as the induction is true and the deduction is proper, that is, the premises are true and the logic is sound.

To illustrate the use of induction and deduction let’s look at a classic example: the doctrine of the Trinity (that God is one divine being comprised of three persons) is a truth derived from a combination of induction and deduction. As you may already know, there is no single statement in scripture that says God is a tri-unity (trinity), or that he is “three-in-one,” or any such equivalent phrase. So, how do we know that God is, in fact, a trinity? We know this truth from a combination of induction and deduction. Here’s how it works. We know (because we are told in the Bible) that there are three distinct persons who are God (the Father, 2 Cor. 1:2; the Son, Jn. 1:1-2; and the Holy Spirit, Acts 5:2-3). We are also told that there is one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 43:10; 44:6,8). These two pieces of information are known inductively from the Bible, i.e., they are given. From these two pieces of information we can then deduce (infer) that God must be one God existing as three persons. While this leaves us with some unanswered questions, we know that the doctrine of the Trinity must be correct since the underlying facts (the two inductive truths) are beyond dispute, and the logic (the deduction) is sound. Does that mean we know everything about the nature of the Trinity? Certainly not! But we do know something, and something is better than nothing.

While it may seem cumbersome to go through these steps to derive a truth, a doctrine like the trinity of God can only be known by deduction. There are other doctrines that are derived in the same way. Without the use of deduction in theology, our understanding of God and his works would be greatly diminished. Nevertheless, the process is not without problems. It’s possible for two people using this process to arrive at incompatible conclusions. In those cases, it’s possible that one is right and the other wrong, or that both are wrong, or that both are partially right and partially wrong. (Obviously, both cannot be entirely right if their conclusions are incompatible) Therefore, it is important to carefully check our theological conclusions to make sure they’re valid.

The following are questions we can ask ourselves to help us to avoid incorrect conclusions in Bible doctrine:

1) Do I have the correct interpretation of all the passages being used?

2) Have I missed some significant and related information located somewhere else in the Bible?

3) Is all of the logic used really logical?

4) Are there other legitimate conclusions that could be drawn from the same information?

4. It’s important to recognize that Bible doctrine is more than simply truth, it’s “connected” truth. Think of it this way, would you rather have all the parts to
your dream car in a box, or boxes, or would you rather have it sitting in your driveway—engine purring and ready to go? Connected truth is always more useful than bits and pieces of truth in isolation. In doctrine, as in other endeavors, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

**Topics generally covered in biblical theology**

Just so you know what’s included in biblical theology, here’s an overview. (This series does not cover all of these topics.)

1) **Theism**
   Theism deals with the existence of God, and subjects like “atheism.”

2) **The Bible**
   The origin and nature of the Bible, and its validity

3) **God**
   God’s nature, purpose and will

4) **Cosmology**
   What the Bible says about the origin of the universe

5) **Christ**
   The person and work of Christ

6) **The Holy Spirit**
   The person and work of the Holy Spirit

7) **Angels**
   Who and what are angels and what is their created purpose and the nature of their work?

8) **Anthropology**
   Man’s origin, nature, and spiritual condition

9) **Soteriology** (so-tear-e-ology)
   Soteriology is the doctrine of salvation—how a sinner is reconciled to God and ultimately brought to a state of perfect righteousness before God.

10) **The Future**
    The kingdom of God, and the judgments, including: the rapture of the Church, the tribulation and the day of the LORD, the millennium, and eternity
1A. How do we know God exists?

Unless God exists, there’s not much point in talking about Bible doctrine.

Reasons people commonly give for believing in God:

“My grandmother told me there is a God.”
Granted, grandmothers are an unusually good source of information; but really, how does she know for sure?

“I can feel God’s presence”
Okay, that’s not entirely bad, but have your feelings always been 100% accurate? Can you really trust your feelings with something this important? What about the Hindu who claims to feel the presence of one of his gods?

“The Bible says God exists”
That’s right, but if there is no God, then the Bible isn’t true either—right?

“I've seen prayers answered”
But, you’ve probably seen some requests go unfulfilled too. I once saw a TV program in which people claimed that touching a fertility statue enabled them to conceive—honest; I’m not making this up! Some couples that had been trying to have children for years claimed that shortly after they touched one of these figurines, they were able to conceive. One scientist, when asked how this could be, simply said, “You only hear about the ones who conceived shortly afterward, but there may have been hundreds, or thousands, that touched the statues and didn’t conceive; you don’t hear about those.” Unfortunately, offering answered prayer as evidence of God’s existence is subject to the same criticism. That’s not to say that answered prayer isn’t important, or significant, just that you’ll have a great deal of difficulty using it as proof of God’s existence.

Arguments used by atheists

When looking for evidence that God exists, the best place to start is to look at the arguments atheists use in their attempt to prove that God doesn’t exist. Although these arguments are stated in many different ways, there are essentially five arguments that are commonly used. We’ll start with the strongest argument, and work to the weakest.

The problem of evil

Statement of the argument: The existence of evil seems incompatible with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God.

Explanation: If God were all-good, he would want to do something about evil (and the suffering associated with it). If he were all-powerful, he would be able to do something about evil. So, the presence of evil in the world implies that either God isn’t all-good, or he isn’t all-powerful, or both. In any case, if either is true, the God of Christianity does not exist.
Problems with this argument:

1. It’s illogical. If there is no God, there is no absolute “good,” nor is there such a thing as “evil,” there is only “what is.” Actually this argument, aimed at disproving God’s existence, presumes the very thing it seeks to disprove!

2. How do we know that God isn’t doing something about evil? Is the world as bad as it possibly could be? The Bible says that God has done something about evil, that he is now doing something about evil, and that he will finally deal with evil in the future. How can the atheist be certain that what the Bible says God has done, is doing, and will do, isn’t true? Note: This argument presumes an a priori [previously decided] rejection of the message of the Bible.

3. This argument is built upon the false assumption that an all-good, all-powerful God would deal with evil immediately. However, the atheist gives no rationale for that assumption. In fact, if God dealt with evil immediately he would have to destroy his creation rather than redeem it. Redemption is a process that requires time; so when God chose to redeem his creation, he necessarily chose to tolerate the existence of evil for a while (see the parables of Matthew 13). Interestingly, this argument implies that it would be more in the character of divine goodness for God to have destroyed his creation rather than redeem it—clearly an illogical assumption.

Assuming naturalism

Statement of the argument: Science will ultimately be able to explain everything in purely natural terms, so there is no need to believe in God as an explanation for the cause of anything.

Problems with this argument:

1. Science can never answer the question of the ultimate origin of the universe, and therefore can never explain everything in purely natural terms.

2. This argument is clearly over-reaching in that it assumes as true what it cannot possibly know. How does the atheist know that science will someday know that everything has a natural cause, unless he has already excluded all other possibilities? When the atheist puts forth this argument, he unwittingly makes naturalism unfalsifiable, and therefore unscientific, since only falsifiable hypotheses can be demonstrated to be true. (Notice that I did not say “falsified” hypotheses; I said “falsifiable” hypotheses, i.e., hypotheses for which a test is possible to determine if they are true or false.)
The term "God" is meaningless (Also called, “the linguistic argument”)

Statement of the argument: The term “God” cannot be defined, and undefined terms are meaningless; therefore, the term “God” is meaningless.

The problem with this argument:

While we may not be able to define the term “God” exhaustively, since we don’t know everything about God’s nature, we can still use it to the extent of what we do know. In other words, we don’t have to know everything about something to know something about something, and that’s fortunate, because if we had to know everything about something in order to know anything about it, we would never know anything at all, since we don’t know everything about anything! Chew on that for a while. (The atheists have obviously missed the point.)

Failure of the positive

Statement of the argument: It is impossible to prove the existence of God.

The problem with this argument:

Even if this were true, it still wouldn’t prove atheism. God could still exist even if all the arguments for his existence were proven wrong. At best, this argument leads only to agnosticism (that one cannot know for certain whether or not God exists).

The historical failure of religion

Statement of the argument: Religious people, including those claiming to be Christians, are often immoral, dishonest, and cruel; therefore, when judged by its outcome, belief in the existence of God is seen to be dysfunctional (i.e., “sick”).

Problems with this argument:

1. It isn’t fair to judge Christianity by religion in general.

2. To the extent that true Christians do not live holy, their lives are inconsistent with the principles of biblical religion. Therefore, their behavior is an indictment of themselves, not biblical religion. In all fairness, if atheists are going to use the sinful lives of those who profess to be Christians as evidence against the existence of God, they ought, to also use the testimonies of many righteous lives as evidence for his existence, but they don’t do that. We could point out that there have also been some pretty notorious atheists in history (Joseph Stalin, for example). Christianity doesn’t profess that men will be perfected in this life, but that they can be forgiven and live less sinful lives by the power of God’s indwelling presence; and there is ample historical evidence that this has indeed been the case in the lives of those who are sincerely devoted to the core principles of biblical religion. No religion in the history of the world has done more to foster the principles of truth, justice, education, liberty, the protection of the weak and helpless, and the status of women and minorities than biblical religion. Ask yourself, “What set of religious principles is responsible for more good than any other”? and the answer, if one is historically literate, will be, “biblical religion.” Compare the
freedoms and institutions of those nations which were founded (imperfectly, of course) upon the principles of the Bible with those founded upon the principles of any other religion (including atheism), and the Bible wins hands down. Compare the status of women in the Christian world with the status of women in countries founded upon other religions, and biblical religion wins hands down. Compare the number of hospitals, orphanages, educational institutions, and other works of kindness and charity founded by those holding to biblical religion over the past four-hundred plus years since the protestant reformation in which biblical religion was communicated to the masses, and biblical religion wins hands down. Atheists are fond of pointing to the cruelty of some of the crusades, and slavery as examples of the product of belief in the Bible, and in God. But such examples are not products of belief, but of unbelief, by the fact that they are fundamentally as odds with the basic principles of biblical religion. It wasn’t atheism, but the revival of Christianity in England and America that led to the eventual elimination of slavery in the Western World, and it’s those nations least impacted by biblical principles that have longest tolerated such abuses.

The problem of the “universal negative”

Now you know the basic arguments atheists use in attempting to disprove God’s existence, and you know the flaws in those arguments. There’s one more huge problem that atheists face in seeking to disprove God’s existence; it’s called “the problem of the universal negative.” Simply stated, the problem of the universal negative is this: It’s impossible to prove a universal negative (i.e., that something isn’t) unless one knows everything, or unless a logical contradiction is involved (i.e., there are no “square-circles”). When the atheist claims that there is no God, he or she is, in effect, claiming to be omniscience (all-knowing), because only someone who knows everything could know that there is no God! Because of the problem of proving a universal negative, many atheists prefer to call themselves “agnostics” or “deists,” even though they are really atheist.

When it comes to proving the existence of God, there are two schools of thought among Christians. Some believe that the existence of God cannot be proven scientifically, holding that the knowledge of God is intuitive (this is called “fideism,” signifying that belief in God is essentially a matter of faith); others believe it is possible to empirically demonstrate the existence of God using observation and logic (this is called theological “empiricism”). Which of these two views is correct? While these views cannot both be correct, since they are contradictory, both have an element of truth. It is certainly not unreasonable that man could know of God intuitively without empirical evidence; on the other hand, there do seem to be some pretty good arguments that support God’s existence. Practically speaking, logical arguments, at best, seem to merely point to the probability, rather than certainty, that there is a God. This is because all scientific proofs are, at best, expressed as probabilities. Having said that, a 1 in 10^20 chance that life arose purely by accident could be construed as a strong indicator in favor of the existence of a divine Creator by a reasonable person. (Actually, the odds are much greater, since the odds of the purely random assembly of even one small protein like Cytochrome-C are over 1 in 10^190.)
Whether we can prove the existence of God or not, there are two things we do know with a high degree of certainty.

1. Most people who claim to be atheists inwardly know, or suspect, that God exists (Rom. 1:16-18), but choose to deny his existence.

2. While it is probably true that logical arguments cannot absolutely prove the existence of God, they can, and do demonstrate that belief in the existence of God is reasonable; in fact, far more reasonable than the alternative provided by naturalism.

Understanding these two things gives us an advantage in the spiritual and intellectual warfare that surrounds us. For the most part, men already know there is a God, but some have built barriers in an attempt to exclude him from their lives. As Christians, we don’t have to prove God’s existence; in most cases, all we have to do is to call men to honest appraisal.

Brainteaser: Before we go further, let’s step through a little mental exercise designed to give us some idea of the difficulty one faces in attempting to prove the existence of God empirically (scientifically). Imagine for a moment someone who lives inside a metal can. He can’t see out, and he has no reason to believe that the physical laws with which he is familiar are operative anywhere except inside the can. How could he go about proving that anything outside the can exists? Obviously his arguments are going to have to be philosophical, since he can’t take his science outside the can.

Arguments that have been offered for the existence of God

The cosmological argument

Statement of the argument: If something exists, unless something comes from nothing, something must be eternal.

Observations on this argument:

1. This argument doesn’t prove the existence of God, God isn’t even mentioned in the argument.

2. The argument doesn’t prove that anything eternal exists; it merely presents two alternatives: either something comes from nothing, or something has always been.

3. Some modern thinkers are not adverse to the possibility that something might come from nothing, usually based on a particular view of quantum theory. This is problematic though, since even quantum theory requires time, and time is something rather than nothing. Stephen Hawking has tried to tackle this problem by postulating the existence of a property called “imaginary time,” which, like the surface of a ball, has no beginning or end; but this simply adds another layer to the proverbial “onion” without really solving the problem of ultimate origin.
If we exclude the possibility that something could come from nothing (since it’s illogical), then we are left with three possibilities:

1. **The first possibility:** The natural cosmic process is eternal.

   **The problem with this possibility:**
   It is generally acknowledged by physical scientists that this possibility is precluded by the second law of thermodynamics. It is simply a fact that potential energy in the universe is being irrecoverably converted to unusable energy. Given a finite amount of time, all of the potential energy in the universe would be used (maximum entropy). Of course if the universe has always been, then there has already been enough time for all of its energy to be converted long ago. Owing to the second law of thermodynamics, there can be no doubt that the universe (as described by the present laws of physics) has not always existed. The real question is, “Where did it come from?” Stephen Hawking suggests that there is an eternal physical principle, which he calls “imaginary time.” However, if such a principle were to exist (which could not be proven by the laws of physics), it would certainly be more akin to the idea of God than to anything in the natural realm. In fact, it would thoroughly redefine nature in the direction of pantheism. (Ultimately, either God is God, or nature is God.)

2. **The second possibility:** Impersonal, unconscious intelligence (what might be called “necessity”) produced and perpetuates the universe. This view has some affinity with pantheism, but isn’t quite the same, since in pantheism there is divine consciousness.) We ought to pay careful attention to this, since it is becoming a “backstop” position for many natural philosophers and cosmologists who have to acknowledge the complexity and design of the universe and biological systems, but who do not want to acknowledge a personal Creator.

   **Problems with this possibility:**

   1. What is, “unconscious intelligence”? This appears to be a contradiction in terms. If, on the other hand, we’re only talking about some sort of necessity, what accounts for the necessity? To say that systems emerge out of necessity and not explain the nature of the necessity is no explanation at all.

   2. If some sort of intelligence were the cause, then it would seem that a personal intelligence (God) would be a more reasonable alternative. It would at least account for where the personal and self-conscious came from. One of the problems with viewing unconscious intelligence as the source of complex biological systems, like man, is that it doesn’t provide a pattern for the creation of personal beings, nor is there any explanation for where the unconscious intelligence came from. One might ask if the same isn’t also true of Christian theism. The answer is, “No”; because in Christian theism God is separate from creation (time matter, energy, space, and physical law); in the unconscious intelligence theory the unconscious intelligence is itself part of the natural order, and this offers no explanation of the ultimate origin of the universe.
3. *The third possibility:* A personal, eternal being (God) produced and perpetuates the universe.

*The problem with this possibility:*

If a personal, eternal being is the source of creation, then we must acknowledge his sovereignty.

While the cosmological argument certainly doesn’t prove God’s existence, it does prove that belief in the existence of God is at least as reasonable as any of the other alternatives. Let’s list the alternatives again.

1. God (an eternal, personal being) made everything out of nothing.
2. Something (what is) came from nothing—absolute nothing, not even time (time is “something”).
3. The cosmic process is eternal, and the implications of the second law of thermodynamics as we understand them are wrong.
4. An unconscious, impersonal intelligence, which itself is part of nature, is responsible for creation.

*The teleological argument (Argument from design)*

The teleological argument is probably the best argument that has been put forward in support of God’s existence. While the cosmological argument proves that something had to be eternal, it doesn’t prove that the something had to be intelligent or personal (though that would be the best explanation). It is important to understand the teleological argument, as it is currently framing the debate between theism and naturalistically (atheistically) dominated cosmology and evolutionary biology. Up to this point in time, naturalism has depended on the Darwinian evolutionary model as an alternative to intelligent design (God); however, the inadequacy of the Darwinian model (gradual mutation and natural selection) to account for biological complexity is becoming more apparent. In time, as Darwinism wanes, some atheists will simply look to another layer of nature for the answer to the complexity of the universe and of life (natural necessity, or unconscious intelligence, or what some natural philosophers call the “anthropic” principle), but perhaps some will be open to consider the possibility that someone outside of creation designed both the universe and life.

*Statement of the argument:* Design in a system implies intelligence and purpose in the originating cause. The universe evidences a very high degree of design; therefore, it seems reasonable that the universe had an intelligence cause.

The following arguments, while useful, probably won’t sound as convincing. However, they’re important to know because you never know what will “resonant” with a particular individual.
The anthropological argument

*Statement of the argument:* It doesn't seem possible that a chemical system could auto-
arrange itself to be self-directing and self-conscious, much less moral and religious.

*Problems with this argument:* The argument is inconclusive.

The moral argument

*Statement of the argument:* There is a general recognition of a supreme moral law (*i.e.*, a sense of right) to which all human beings are obligated, and to which all people appeal in matters of dispute. For example, men innately believe in justice, whether or not they practice or promote it, or agree upon its particulars. Such a law implies a Lawgiver.

*The problem with this argument:* The argument is inconclusive.

The ontological argument

This is the argument of Leibnitz, and Decarte. It is given only for historical interests since it isn’t logically valid.

*Statement of the argument:* We have the idea of an absolutely perfect being, but existence is a quality of perfection, so an absolutely perfect being *must* exist. [You may need to ponder this a while!]

*The problem with this argument:* If there is an absolutely perfect being, he *must* exist; however, merely conceiving of such a thing does not necessitate its existence, any more than conceiving of the perfect local church means that one must exist.

Summary of atheism/theism

Perhaps you’ve noticed from your reading that the Bible nowhere attempts to prove God’s existence through rational arguments. There’s probably a reason for that. At some level, everyone is already convinced that God exists (*cf.* Rom. 1:18-20). If that’s true, the person who maintains that there is no God, isn’t struggling with an intellectual problem, they’re struggling with a rejection problem. They have a self-serving reason to exclude God from their knowledge; such a belief allows them to think that they are free to live according to their own standards (see again, Rom. 1:18-32).

That raises an interesting question. If everyone really knows that God exists, how do they know it, particularly in light of the inadequacy of logical arguments to absolutely prove God’s existence? The answer is that the Bible treats the knowledge of God as intuitive—that is, everything in creation and within man points to God’s existence. The denial of God’s existence is just that—a denial of what man knows by intuition.
2A. What kind of God do we worship?

A few years ago in America you could assume that your neighbors had basically the same idea of God, as did you. At that time the religious diversity of most neighborhoods consisted of Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics and other Christian groups. This is no longer the case. Now, chances are there are people in your neighborhood from other cultures and religious backgrounds. Since we can no longer assume the people we come into contact with share the same basic conception of God, it is important that we understand how other people conceive of God.

Judaic and Christian theism

The Judaic and Christian conception of God (the God of the Bible) is that God is eternal (timeless and without beginning), transcendent personal spirit (not of the natural realm), and infinite in all of his qualities, including his moral perfection, power, intellect, knowledge, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, truth, and presence; and thus immutable, since he can neither be more nor less perfect than he is. The Christian conception also acknowledges that God exists as a tri-unity (trinity) of distinct co-equal persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) sharing a singular divine essence. Though Judaism does not acknowledge the triune nature of God, in the Judaic and Christian view, God, who is transcendent (supernatural) by nature, is nonetheless involved with his creation (immanent), exerting continual providential care and control over all things, and thus absolutely sovereign over all things.

Deism

Description: Deists view God as eternal and transcendent, but they are not agreed as to his specific attributes. They believe that God created the world but has left it to operate according to its own created principles. Deists do no believe that God intervenes in the natural order that he created; therefore they do not believe in miracles, including divine revelation, which of course, is why they are unclear as to God’s qualities—some of which can only be known through divine revelation. Historically, deism has been a way of acknowledging the existence of God, without having to be accountable to him, since it views all religion as man made.

Problems with this view:

1. Deism rejects the miracles of the Bible while accepting the biggest miracle of all—creation.

2. Deism’s rejection of miracles is arbitrary, and contrary to both reason and the Bible.

Pantheism

Description: Pantheism sees all as God, and matter as a delusion. Reincarnation is viewed as bondage for misdeeds or for lack of understanding reality.

Problems with pantheism:

1. Pantheists believe that there is one unchanging reality—God. They also believe that we can come to understand that we are God (or, at least a part of
God). But, if God comes to understand that he is God, then he isn’t an unchanging reality.

2. If the material realm is only an illusion, why do pantheists eat, sleep, bath, brush their teeth, and perform other bodily functions? The fact is, pantheism fails the test of reality since no one can live consistent with its assumptions.

3. Pantheism is characterized by a lack of compassion toward the suffering. According to pantheism, people suffer to work off bad *karma* (negativity from past misdeeds or failings), so in helping a suffering person, one is actually preventing him or her from working off their *karma*; therefore, (according to pantheism) it would be better to let them suffer.

4. The status of women is very poor in pantheistic religion. Being born as a woman is usually viewed as a punishment for “bad karma” (*i.e.*, past misdeeds or failings.)

**Finite Godism**

*Description:* Finite godism is the belief that God is a part of the creation, and thus finite.

*Problems with finite godism:*

1. A finite god would require a cause (since he could not be eternal); therefore, no finite god could be the explanation of ultimate origins. We would have to ask: Who made the finite god?

2. “Finite” and “god” seem to be incompatible terms. How would such a “god” differ from any other created thing (except in the magnitude of his, or her attributes)?

3. In most finite god religions, the deity, as conceived by his worshipers, is beset with all of the weaknesses as mortals, and differs from them only in the extent of his or her powers and life span. Such a god concept is inferior logically and morally to the transcendent God of the Bible. (Remember, “transcendent” refers to the fact that God is not part of creation, but rather is outside of creation.)

**Polytheism**

*Description:* Polytheism is similar to finite godism, but subscribes to many gods rather than just one. Most ancient religions were polytheistic. Because polytheism was prevalent in ancient time, the Bible has much to say about it. (*See,* Isa. 43:10-11; 44:6,8; 45:5-6,18-25; 46:9-10; Jer. 10:1-16; 1 Cor. 8:4; Rev. 9:20)

*The problem with polytheism:*

The gods of polytheism are finite and therefore subject to all of the problems given above for finite godism.
3A. What is God like?

We’ve already discussed God’s existence. What we want to consider now is the manner of God existence. In other words, what is God like? While we will be examining some of the qualities of God with which we are familiar, we really don’t understand any of these fully, and there are undoubtedly qualities of which we are completely unaware. In a way, it’s good that we don’t understand God too well; he would have to be finite (limited) in order for us to fully comprehend him.

[If you would like to do some in-depth reading on the attributes of God see, Knowing God, by J. I. Packer, published by InterVarsity Press. Almost all volumes on systematic theology include information on this subject, and most topical Bibles have references for the attributes of God.]

The attributes of God are generally categorized as either communicable, or non-communicable. Communicable qualities are those qualities of God’s being that he can share with his creatures. The non-communicable qualities are those that he alone can possess. The communicable qualities are mostly moral, whereas the non-communicable qualities tend to relate to the nature of his essence. We will look at both of these categories, beginning with the non-communicable qualities.

The non-communicable qualities (qualities that cannot be shared with his creatures)

God exists

God isn’t just a concept, or an idea; he is uncreated, and depends upon nothing for his existence.

God is holy (metaphysically, with regard to his essence)

The Bible describes two kinds of holiness: “moral holiness” describes God’s separateness from evil; and “metaphysical holiness” describes God’s separateness from creation. Most people are familiar with the concept of God’s moral holiness, but most are unfamiliar with the concept of God’s metaphorical holiness. Metaphysical holiness means that God is not part of creation. (If God were not metaphysically holy, that would imply that creation must be eternal, which is the position of finite godism and polytheism.) The Bible declares that God made the creation out of nothing (Heb. 11:3). If you want an analogy (there really isn’t a good one), think of it this way: All of creation can be likened to a bubble in nothing (not space—that would be something—I’m talking about real nothing, no space, no time, just nothing). Creation (matter, energy, time, space) exists only in that bubble, but God exists independent of the bubble. He made the bubble so that we could exist.

The concept of metaphorical holiness is usually referred to as “transcendence.” A complementary truth is that God is also “immanent.” Immanence refers to the fact that God is engaged in, or involved with his creation, even though with respect to his essence, he is distinct.
The OT saints seemed to have had a better grasp of metaphysical holiness than do we, perhaps that’s because we don’t spend a lot of time reading what they wrote! They understood that God is, well—GOD! Many people today, even Christians, fail to understand this. We’ve trivialized God into little more than a cosmic buddy, psych-therapist, or worse, a cosmic “Santa Claus.”

God is spirit (Jn. 4:24; Heb. 12:9)

God’s “substance,” for lack of a better term, isn’t material. We don’t really know what spirit is. Angels are also spirits, and the question comes up as to whether their spirit is like God’s spirit. Since we really don’t know a lot about spirit, we could probably get ourselves into a considerable amount of trouble with such questions. However, the chief characteristic of spirit is that it is not material. God’s spirit is eternal, and therefore fundamentally different from any created spirit (whether angelic or human).

God is eternal [timeless] (Ex. 3:14-15; Deut. 33:27; Isa. 40:28; 57:15; Mic. 5:2; Rev. 4:11)

Many people, when they think about eternity, think about God being very, very old. Actually, that’s about as far from what eternal means as one can get. Eternal means “timeless.” In other words, God is completely unaffected by time. He can see time and interact with his creatures existing in time, but his essence (i.e., his being) exists apart from time and isn’t affected in any way by time. Okay, are you ready for a really interesting idea? If God is totally unaffected by time, he could never have aged, not even a second, not even a nanosecond! So that idea we get of an old guy sitting on a throne with a long white beard is way off. God isn’t old; in fact, he’s younger than any of us, even though he has always existed. We also need to keep in mind that only God is eternal. Angels and men may have eternal life and live forever, but only God is eternal.

There are four key ideas associated with God’s eternity:

1. Since God is eternal, he must also be immutable, because a timeless being cannot change, with respects to His essence.
2. Since God is eternal, he must be infinite, because only an infinite being could be eternal.

3. Since God is eternal, nothing could be his cause.

4. Since God is eternal, he must be omniscient, because he can never learn anything he didn’t already know. (That would be a change.)

God is immutable [changeless in His person] (Ex. 3:14; Mal. 3:6; Jam. 1:17; Psa. 102:24-27; Heb. 1:10-12)

If God is timeless, obviously he cannot change. Time is a measure of change—no time, no change. Do you see how eternality and immutability are linked together? The fact that God is immutable doesn’t mean that he cannot respond to things that change. It simply means that with respect to his essence, he never changes. The Bible occasionally refers to God “changing his mind” (Gen. 6:6; Ex. 32:14), but such references are figures that refer not to any change in God, but to his response to changes in his creatures.

God is a plurality of persons (a tri-unity, or “trinity”)

The concept that God is three eternally distinct persons, sharing the same divine essence, is called the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a very important truth. Apart from understanding the trinity of God it is impossible to fully appreciate either the ministry and sacrifice of Christ, or the present work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The doctrine of the Trinity is central to Christianity, and that is evidenced by the fact that every so-called “Christian” cult denies this truth.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not difficult to prove, however, it is a deductive truth (i.e., a theological inference).

How the trinity of God is deduced:

**Induction** (observations from the Bible)

1. The Bible explicitly says there are three distinct persons who are God:
   a. The Father is God (2 Cor. 1:2)
   b. The Son is God (Jn. 1:1-2)
   c. The Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:2-4)

2. The Bible emphatically states in many places that there is only one God (Isa. 43:10; 44:6,8). This is referred to as the “unity of God” (see Deut. 6:4; Jn. 5:44).

**Deduction** (logical inference)

Since three distinct persons are said to be God, and there is only one God, God must exist as three persons sharing the same divine essence.
The Relationship Between Members of the Trinity

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the members should not be confused; for instance, the Father is not the Holy Spirit, nor is the Holy Spirit the Son, etc.

Additional support for the Trinity:

1. The three members are seen working co-extensively (meaning at the same level, e.g., creating, etc.). See, Jn. 14:16 and 23; also see Isa. 43:10-11 cp. Jn. 4:42; also see 1 Jn. 3:22-24.

2. The three members are referred to in ways only appropriate for equals (e.g., Matt. 28:18-20 in the threefold baptism formula).

3. Various grammatical structures are used in the NT to affirm the connection between members of the Trinity. Note the following:

   a. Titus 2:13
      Here “God” and “Savior” both refer to Jesus Christ. These two words (connected by the copulative “and” —Gr. *kai* ) share the same definite article [“the”]. In Greek grammar, this is only permissible when both words refer to the same thing (this is called, “Granville Sharpe’s Rule”). The one definite article indicates that there is only one object (*i.e.*, Christ is both God and Savior).
Here's what Paul said:

Had Paul wished to indicate that “God” and “Jesus” were distinct, he would have said something like this:

b.  *John 1:1-2*

This passage emphatically asserts the absolute deity of Christ: “…the Word was God.” This is the most definite statement on the deity of Christ to be found in the Bible. Why do I say that? In Greek they didn’t underline or italicize words to emphasize a point, instead they moved the emphasized word closer to the beginning of the sentence. (That would wreck havoc in English, but they had a way of keeping things straight.) Here’s the way the Greek reads (word for word).

“…and God [nominative case] was the Word [nominative case]”

To a Greek reader, it would be obvious that this sentence has been constructed to emphasize the deity of “the Word.” Why? Because “God” is clearly the predicate nominative of this clause (not the subject)—indicating that it has been moved forward (before the main verb) for the sake of emphasis. We know this because the article ["the"] is absent from the word “God,” and you can’t have a definite subject ("the Word") without a definite predicate nominative. So why did John drop the definite article from “God?” Well, if John had simply reversed the subject ["the Word"] with the predicate nominative ["God"] without dropping off the article ["the"] from “God,” the reader would have had no way of knowing the words had been transposed, and the sentence would then read, “and God was the Word.” So here’s a simple observation from Greek grammar:
Anytime we see a subject and predicate nominative reversed, 1) the word which has been moved to the front is being emphasized, and 2) even though the article has been dropped (as a signal to the reader that it’s the predicate nominative, not the subject), the predicate is still definite. This is called, “the rule of the definite predicate.”

Note that John wasn’t saying the Word was “a god” (as the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ New World Translation mistranslates), he was saying the Word was GOD.

4. The connection between various members is often stated.

John 10:30-33

Here Jesus asserts that he and the Father are “one.” A common approach in denying Jesus’ claim to deity in this passage is to say that He was merely claiming to be “in harmony” with God. However, the context is very clear that this was intended as a claim of equality with the Father, even those who rejected his claim understood very well what he was saying, as is evidenced by the fact that they wanted to stone him for making himself out to be God, cf. v.33. Actually, what Jesus was claiming was that he and the Father are “one and the same” essence.

5. Context often reveals a connection between various members of the Trinity.

Hebrews 1:10

This passage is quoted from Psalm 102:25 and applied to Christ. It says, “Thou, LORD, in the beginning didst lay the foundations of the earth…” Aside from the fact that this passage expressly refers to Christ as the Creator of the world, it also identifies Him as “Jehovah.” Did you notice that in the Hebrews 1:10 passage the word “LORD” appears in all capital letters? That means that the one in view in Psalm 102:25 is “Jehovah.” (This is a condensed quotation, the actual name “Jehovah” [Heb. ‘YHWH] appears back in verse 22 of Psalm 102.) In other words, Jesus is Jehovah—what a blow for the Jehovah’s Witnesses!

Details on the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit will be presented when we come to those topics.

Some incorrect views with respect to the Trinity

It is important to understand views that have been rejected. Many ancient heresies are being recycled today. In fact, all cults are simply recycled heresies, mostly Gnostic heresies. Recognizing false teaching can help one to not become a victim of the cults.

1. Modalism

Modalism says that what we call the “persons” of the Godhead are simply three modes of God’s existence. According to modalism, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three projections or manifestations of the one being of
God, but not three distinct persons. Modalism claims that God sometimes appears as the Father, and at other times as the Son or the Holy Spirit. However, the Bible teaches that the three members of the Godhead are distinct persons. For example, at Jesus’ baptism we see all three members distinctly (the Son coming for baptism, the Father speaking from heaven, and the Spirit descending upon Christ); also Jesus prayed to the Father, and said that when he returned to heaven he would send the Holy Spirit.

2. Arianism
Arianism states that the Father is the only eternal God. He created the world and the Son, and the Son created the Holy Spirit. In Arianism the Son is not God, nor is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Arian view is a denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. A related view called patripassianism claims that the Father became incarnate and died on the cross. (There are many variations of each of these views.) Arianism was a heresy that developed out of Christian Gnosticism and was condemned by the early Church. Today, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are the largest Arian group in existence still claiming a connection to Christianity.

3. Adoptionism
Adoptionism says that Jesus was born a mere man and at some point (possibly his baptism) he was “adopted” by God as his Son. Naturally, this view denies the eternality of the Son. This view also has ties to early Christian Gnosticism.

God’s communicable qualities (qualities that can be shared with his creatures)

God is morally holy (Lev. 19:2; Deut. 32:4; Psa. 145:17; Ezek. 39:7; Jam. 1:13)

A number of qualities are associated with holiness, such as goodness, righteousness, truth, and justice. Each of these qualities expresses God’s holiness in a particular way. It is important to realize that God doesn’t just determine to do good—he is good. He doesn’t just determine to act righteous—he is righteous. He doesn’t just decide to act holy—he is holy. God acts the way he does because he is what he is. That is to say, God’s moral qualities are intrinsic, (i.e., they are a function of who and what he is). Let’s look at each of these expressions of God’s holiness, beginning with some basic observations on holiness itself.

God’s moral holiness refers to his separation from evil. Note the following observations regarding God’s moral holiness.

1. God cannot be the source of evil—though he can be the source of the free will that enables one to choose evil.

2. God in no way necessitates evil in his creation. Sin is always a voluntary act (1 Cor. 10:13).

3. God’s holiness is manifested in his original creation, his moral laws, his teachings, his judgment upon evil, and his ultimate restoration of the sinner to perfection.
4. The fall of one of God's moral creatures in no way blemishes God's holiness (as long as God requires full recompense to his holiness in the form of divine retribution). Although God created man with the capacity to choose good or evil, he did not create man sinful, nor was there any necessity for man to be sinful. [Although we will deal with the issue of free will later, I will just mention here that God originally created man with a free will; however, in falling into sin, man's will became enslaved to sin and is no longer capable of righteousness in and of itself without divine aid (Rom. 8:5-13). Therefore, while man appears to make free choices in his fallen state, those choices, apart from divine enabling, are limited to the range of choices that fallen man is capable of, which is far less than what he was originally capable of before the fall; and therefore while man's will appears, from the human perspective, to be free, it is not, as is evidenced by his inability to choose righteousness apart from divine enabling.]

**Goodness** *(Lk. 18:18-19; Rom. 2:4)*

Not only is God separate from evil (i.e., morally holy), but he is positively good. Goodness is hard to define (philosophers and theologians have been debating this for some time), but the idea seems to be that "good" is wholesome and constructive—what we might call "nurturing"—rather than destructive. Now, I'm not sure how far we can run with this idea, but let's give it a try. God's goodness would seem to speak of his "nurturing" (fostering whatever is consistent with his original created purpose for us—which is man's highest and best end). Think about this for a moment: If God is good, as the Bible says, then whatever God desires for us is what is best for us (since he never desires what is not good). That means that we can never do better than to do his will, even though it may not seem to be what we want, or what is pleasant at the moment (Rom.12:1-2).

If God is good, why would anyone not want to respond to him in faith, obeying whatever he says? The answer is simple. Every time we refuse to respond to him in faith (which always involves obedience), we are, perhaps without thinking about it, denying his goodness, righteousness and truth, because we have allowed ourselves to believe that what he has asked of us is somehow not best. Paul touches on this in Romans 12:1-2 when he challenges us to be transformed through the renewing of our minds, that we might discover, by experience, that God's will is good, and perfect (i.e., complete).

**Righteousness** *(Psa. 89:14; 97:2; Jn. 17:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 16:5)*

Righteousness is similar to goodness, but seems to relate to one's attitude, and actions in regard to a standard (the Law—for instance). That being the case, we can say that God is the epitome of every precept of moral law that he has ever given. Think of it this way: God doesn't conform to moral law; rather, moral laws are expressions of God's own character. When God says, "Don't lie," it is because lying is abhorrent to him (he would never tell a lie). When God says, "Don't commit adultery," it is because he would never be unfaithful to one with whom he has made a covenant.

As far as God's moral standards are concerned, all men and women fall short (Rom. 3:23) and are deserving of death (Rom. 6:23). How does God solve this problem? Amazingly, when he washes away the sin of a person believing in Christ, he also conveys to them Christ's own righteousness (Rom. 3:21-24). That's right! In God's eyes a saved person is as righteous as Christ.
Truth

Truth is reality. Anything that distorts reality is repugnant to God. Why does God make such a “big deal” over reality? Because non-reality is to sin what fertilizer is to plants. Was Satan thinking realistically when he thought he could be like God? Was Eve thinking realistically when she thought she could be like God? Was Judas thinking realistically when he betrayed Jesus? Is anyone who rejects God, to his own destruction, thinking realistically? Twisted thinking is at the root of all sin, either as its source, or as its justification. So when God says he’s the God of truth, what does that mean? It means we can depend on the fact that God will never lead us wrong in anything. It means we can trust him better than we can trust ourselves. God is incapable of distorting the truth in even the slightest way. It also tells us that God means everything he says—just like he says.

Here are a few observations from scripture about truth:

1. God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18).
2. God cannot be deceptive (i.e., having some nefarious motive).
3. God cannot fail to keep his word (1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Jn. 1:9).

Justice (Psa. 11:4-7; 19:9; Rom. 2:1-16)

God’s justice refers to the expression of his holiness in dealing with the sins of his creatures. Sin is an assault against God’s holiness, and condemnation of the sinner is essential in order for God to remain holy. It is impossible that God could allow even one sin to go unrecompensed in full measure. When God condemns sin, and the sinner committing the sin, he is doing what he must do. There are many expressions of God’s temporal (earthy) justice in the Bible; however, the final and eternal expression of God’s justice will be the consignment of all the unsaved to the Lake of Fire, forever (Rev. 20:11-15).

Apparently God has only two options in dealing with man’s sin:

1. Sin can be graciously forgiven in Christ, based on Christ’s substitutionary atonement, accessed by faith (in which case God’s holiness is recompensed by the infinite value of Christ’s death for our sin).

2. Or, it must be paid in full through eternal damnation. A question that sometimes comes up is this: “If man’s sin is so brief, why must God’s punishment be forever?” The answer, as difficult as it may be to accept, and comprehend, would seem to be that any sin against infinite holiness, no matter how insignificant it may seem to us, is infinity evil. None of us really understands the enormity of this problem, and that leads some people to accept theological errors like annihilationism—the denial of eternal punishment.
God is infinite in knowledge and wisdom (Psa. 147:4-5; Prov. 15:3-11; Jer. 23:23-24; Heb. 4:13)

Knowledge and wisdom aren’t the same. Whereas knowledge is an awareness of facts, wisdom is the use of knowledge for the highest and greatest good. God possesses both knowledge and wisdom without limitation.

What does God know?

1. God knows all things that are (in actuality):
   a. In all places (Job 26:6; Ps. 33:13; 139:1-16; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39)
   b. In all times frames (past, present, and future) (Isa. 42:9; 44:6-8; 46:10; Acts 2:22-23; Heb. 4:13)

2. God knows all things that could be (potentially). He possesses what is sometimes called, "contingent knowledge." (1 Sam. 23:10-12; Matt. 11:21)

That God knows all things is usually referred to as “omniscience.” Does God’s omniscience comfort or frighten you? (Think about it.)

God is infinite in his power (Psa. 135:6; 148:1-5; Jer. 10:1-16; 32:17,27; Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 19:6)

So, just how much power is infinite power? Well, it’s so much that even if some is used, there’s just as much left as there was before!

Here are some observations concerning God’s omnipotence:

1. Omnipotence doesn’t mean that God can do everything. It means that he has unlimited power to do anything that power can accomplish, and which is consistent with his own nature (Heb. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:13).

2. God’s power is inherent in his being. That is to say, he doesn’t draw upon or leverage power outside of himself. In fact, all power is ultimately derived from him—even the power to do evil. (Do you think this might be related in some way to the question of why God must judge evil?)

3. God’s power is never diminished by its exercise.

God is personal

Some religions conceive of God as an unconscious force or merely an intelligence behind the universe, this is particularly true in pantheistic religions. The Bible, however, presents a very different picture of God. In the Bible, God is living, intelligent, purposive, emotive, active, free, and self-conscious. In other words, He’s a real person.
God's personal qualities:

1. God is living (Jer. 10:10 cf. vv 3-5)
2. God is intelligent (Prov. 3:19)
   a. He possesses knowledge (the perception of facts/truth)
   b. He possesses understanding (insight into facts)
   c. He possesses wisdom (the ability to use knowledge to the best and highest purpose)
3. God has emotions (Jn. 3:16)
4. God has a purpose (Eph. 3:8-11)
5. God is active (Dan. 6:25-27)
6. God is free (sovereign) (Dan. 4:34-35 {per Nebuchadnezzar}, Eph. 1:11 {per Paul})
7. God is self-conscious (1 Cor. 2:10-11)

If God is personal, and he made us personal, doesn't it seem reasonable that he desires a personal relationship with us? If we look, we can find illustrations of this truth all the way through the Bible. Think of the Bible characters who had a personal relationship with God. If these people had a personal relationship with God, we can too. In many ways their relationship with God is a model for our relationship with him.

*_God wants us to communicate with him_*

Communication with God is what we call prayer. Sadly, prayer for many people is little more than presenting God with a petty, often selfish, “wish list,” as if he were Santa Claus, or a genie instead of God. The person who wants their prayer life to be effective, needs to discover what God wants, and then start praying to that end. God loves to answer prayer that is offered in accordance with his will.

Here are some biblical principles, which if applied can help us to pray more effectively. They come primarily from Matthew 6:8-13.

1. Focus on God, not on yourself (Matt. 6:9).
2. Pray for God's will to be accomplished (Matt. 6:10). We can be a lot more effective at this if we read and study the Bible to discover God’s will. But even if we’re uncertain about God’s will in a particular situation, we should still pray that his will be done.
3. We should focus on what we need, rather than frivolous desires (Matt. 6:11, cf., Jam. 4:3).
4. We need to confess our sin (Matt. 8:12). It’s awfully difficult to pray a sincere prayer when we’re nursing some sin.
5. We should pray for our life to reflect God’s character (Matt 6:12).
6. We ought to pray with an awareness of the spiritual warfare around us (Matt. 6:13).
7. We need to examine our own motives. Remember, we’re praying in Christ’s name (Jn. 14:13-14), so we should ask for the same things Christ would ask for us.

8. Be willing to accept God’s answer, otherwise we aren’t praying—we’re demanding!

The will of God

In considering the will of God, there are a number of questions to which we would like to have answers.

1. What is, “the will of God?”

2. If God is sovereign, and evil exists, must we conclude that evil is within God’s will? If so, is God responsible for evil?

3. Are there aspects of God’s will that are going to happen no matter what we do?

4. Does God have a “perfect will” and a less perfect will?

Three Aspects of God’s Will

The three aspects of God’s will

1. The decreed (determinant) will of God

The decreed (determinant) aspect of God’s will is that which must come to pass. It has been predetermined and God will infallibly bring it to pass (Deut. 29:29; Acts 2:22-23 cf. Lk. 22:22; Eph. 1:11).
2. The expressed (or revealed) will of God

The expressed aspect of God’s will is what God wants us to do (and what he has told us to do, or not do), but which he does not necessitate by decree (Matt. 6:10; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:17). In other words, we have the capacity to disobey God’s expressed will, but when we do so, we incur serious consequences as a result of our sin. An example of God’s revealed will is that he doesn’t want us to steal from other people (Ex. 20:15; Rom. 13:9)—he will allow us the freedom to steal, if we choose to do so, but we still incur the consequences of our action.

3. The sovereign will of God

The sovereign aspect of God’s will encompasses all of reality (past, present and future), and includes what God decrees, desires, and what he neither decrees nor desires, but what he allows, e.g., evil (Eph. 1:11). It has been observed that, “even evil men always do the hidden will of God.” Of course God does not cause, nor does he desire evil, but he is sovereign over it, just as he is sovereign over everything, and he does use the evil caused by his creatures to bring about his eternal purposes. For instance, God may use the terrible circumstances of war (ultimately created by the sinful actions of men) to cause people to turn to him.

Basic principles for discovering God’s will.

1. The expressed will of God (as revealed in the scriptures) should be the foundation for all decision making for a Christian. The Bible should be the first place one goes for direction.

   a. We do not need to ask God for guidance regarding matters already addressed in the Bible. Asking, when we already have the answer, is usually nothing more than a pretext for rejecting God’s revealed will.

   b. God will never lead us in a path that is clearly inconsistent with His revealed will in scripture.

   c. God wants His children to grow to spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:11-16). We know that mature people make better decisions than immature people (obvious, right?), so if we want to be a better decision maker, we need to concentrate on growing up spiritually. There are no shortcuts, so forget about finding some experience that’s going to instantly transform you into a really “spiritual” person. Spiritual maturity is a challenging, lifelong process of opportunity, trials, learning, trusting, and growth—the sooner we get starting, the better!

   If God needs to position you into some place, situation, ministry, or whatever, such that following the general guidance of scripture would not get you there, consider the following option.

2. God can, and sometimes does intervene supernaturally on our behalf.

   a. God can arrange events so as to engineer a particular outcome. This is a non-predisclosing form of guidance (meaning that we don’t find out what God
had in mind until after it has happened)—he simply works out the details without telling us what to do in advance.

b. God can convict, convince, comfort, and illuminate our understanding through his indwelling presence.

c. God can do whatever is necessary and consistent with his purpose, will, and nature) to accomplish his purpose.

We often worry needlessly about finding God’s will, but if we are obeying the written word of God, and seeking his will for our lives, we can’t miss it—God will see to that.
4A. What’s so special about the Bible?

The Bible is a unique book

Have you ever been asked, “What’s so special about the Bible?” It’s an interesting question, with an extraordinary answer! The Bible is a totally unique book—even though it’s not uncommon to find religious writers, even theologians, who minimize the uniqueness of the Bible, placing it on a par with the literature of other religions.

Is the Bible just another “holy” book? Let’s take a look and see. Other than the Bible, there are five major groups of religious writings in use today—the Veda of Brahmanism, the Tripitaka of Buddhism, the Zend-Avesta of Zoroastrianism, the writings of Confucianism (a philosophy), and the Koran of Islam. While there are other ancient religious writings that date from before the writing of the Bible, the Bible claims to contain a comprehensive record of God’s dealings with man from the creation, a record assumed to be passed down from one generation to the next in oral tradition, perhaps along with some written material long lost in antiquity. If the message of the Bible is taken at face value, though it may not be the oldest written document, its truth antedates all other religions, since its story begins with the creation of the world.

The question, “Is the Bible true?” is certainly the most important question anyone could ask. If the Bible is true, we are in the midst of a gigantic cosmic struggle between light and darkness, good and evil; and the outcome, both cosmic and personal, defines our eternal destiny. Could anything be more important? Many people dismiss the Bible as just another collection of religious myths, stories, quasi-history, and religious doctrine, most of which was written by well-meaning, but basically naive people who didn’t have the capacity, means, or motivation to see that their religious beliefs were merely superstition in the garb of truth. After all, we have so many contradictory religious writings that most, if not all, can’t be true anyway.

Is the Bible really different than other religious literature? To answer that question we have to look at the Bible from several angles. For instance, it’s critically important to know whether or not the Bible is historically correct. If it isn’t correct on basic historical facts and geography, there’s not much reason to believe that it’s correct on anything else. Secondly, we need to know if the Bible’s message makes sense. Anything that doesn’t make sense isn’t likely to be true. Third, we need to know whether the supernatural element in the Bible is really believable, and whether it can be verified. Fourth, we need some means of determining whether or not the religious “truths” taught in the Bible are actually true. Of course, this is a tall order for one very simple reason: there is no way to verify the supernatural from within the natural realm. If we try to use such a methodology, we will inevitably fail; but God anticipated this problem. Although it is not possible to scientifically test the supernatural from within the natural realm, it is possible for the supernatural to manifest itself within the natural realm. The real question we must ask then, is this: Is does the Bible evidences an intelligence and wisdom beyond this world?
The Bible is unique

1. The Bible is the only book that presents a comprehensive and connected history of man’s spiritual condition and needs from the time of his creation into the eternal future. There is no other book that claims to be God’s word that does this.

2. The Bible is the only book to present a comprehensive picture on the nature and purpose of God and his plan for mankind, and the physical universe.

3. The Bible is the only book that provides clear and consistent evidence of its supernatural origin through the record of accurately fulfilled, detailed prophecies. For example, Isaiah 53, written over seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, gives over thirty highly specific details of the life of Christ; and Daniel 9:23-27, written over five hundred years before the birth of Christ, prophesied the time of the death of the Messiah to be after a period of 69 “weeks” of years had ended. That period ended March 30, A.D. 33; Christ was crucified three days after that date on April 3, A.D. 33! Unlike the prophecies of people like Nostradamus and others claiming to predict the future, the Bible’s prophecies aren’t vague riddles into which almost anything can be read seen as a “fulfillment,” but clear and precise statements that deal with particular people, places, events, and times. For a catalog of biblical prophecy and its fulfillment see, The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook, by John F. Walvoord.

4. The Bible is the only ancient book that consistently proves to be the product of a superior intelligence—based on its statements about the physical universe. For example, the Bible states that the earth is round and suspended in space (Job 26:7; Isa. 40:22)—a fact not confirmed by science until the late fifteenth century; the Bible says that the universe had a beginning and that it was created out of nothing (Gen 1:1-2, cf. Heb 11:3; Jn. 1:1-3)—a fact not confirmed by science until the mid-twentieth century. The Bible also declares that the stars and the earth are in space (Gen. 1:1-31) [On his point see the NASB, which correctly translates the Hebrew term rakia as “expanse”—not a solid substance (firmament) as indicated by the KJV which was tainted by the early Greek translation called the “Septuagint.” And, contrary to the beliefs of the middle-ages church, the Bible nowhere states or implies that the earth is the center of the universe.

5. The Bible, though written over fifteen centuries by more than forty different authors, exhibits a singularity of purpose, morality, message, and theology. Features like “types” (a sort of prophetic analogy) demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Bible’s message across many centuries. (“Types” are Old Testament people, events, or objects that were clearly intended to prefigure some New Testament person, event, or truth; for example: the Old Testament sacrifices and the Passover are a typical prefigurations of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.)

The Bible’s message is unique

Not only is the Bible itself unique, but its message is also unique. That’s not to say that no other religious documents say any of these things, but only the Bible says them all.
Some of the fundamental themes that permeate the Bible

1. There is one true God, though existing as three persons.

2. The universe is not eternal, God created it out of nothing. [It’s interesting that modern science has just, within the last fifty years, “discovered” the truth that the universe had a beginning. Up until the mid-1960s, most scientists assumed the universe was eternal (the “steady state” theory). We now know the universe is expanding at an incredible pace. If we could simply play this history in reverse, we would see the universe shrink into an infinitesimal point and then vanish, which confirms the Bible’s statement that the universe indeed must have had a beginning. For more information on what the Bible says about creation see, What the Bible Actually Says About the Origin of the Universe, by the author, at www.biblicalreader.com]

3. God is transcendent; he exists apart from creation. This is in sharp contrast to both pantheism and polytheism, which view God, or the gods as being part of the creation. It’s interesting that many present-day cosmologists are forced to admit that only something, or someone completely outside of the universe could be the ultimate cause of the creation. The Bible is the only ancient book that recognizes the necessity of transcendent causality; and no religion that’s wrong about the universe’s ultimate origin can be right about man’s present spiritual need. While modern science has only recently admitted this transcendent causal necessity, it was the very first fact recorded in the Bible (Genesis 1:1), and reaffirmed in the New Testament as the very cornerstone of belief concerning Christ’s qualifications as Savior. If man needs saving, only a transcendent Creator could save him (John 1:1-5; Colossian 1:16-17). While the Koran accepts the concept of a transcendent God, that idea undoubtedly came from the Old Testament, written almost two thousand years before the Koran!

4. God is perfect in every respect, and his creation was originally made perfect.

5. Man was originally given a free will to choose good or evil.

6. Man did evil by disobeying his Creator, and became sinful in both his nature and choices. In this state, man is “lost,” separated from God and unable to remedy his fallen situation by his own power. In man’s spiritually dead state, his will is in bondage to sin, and he cannot please God. From the human perspective, man’s will appears to be free, but it can only choose from a limited range of choices—the range of choices consistent with a fallen nature.

7. Man’s sin is passed down from one generation to the next, so that all who are born through natural generation are born in a ruined, fallen state.

8. God, from eternity, knowing of man’s choice, set in motion a plan to redeem his creation.

9. For thousands of years God prepared mankind so his plan could be brought about. Through prophecies and pronouncements, God prepared man for his saving work on the cross. During that time he revealed himself and his plan to man in many ways.
10. When the time was right, God sent his only divine Son into the world to offer him as a sacrifice so that sinful men could be brought back to God. In fact, God’s plan calls for more than just reconciliation; it calls for adoption, by which the reconciled actually become members of God’s family.

11. God will someday send his divine Son, Jesus Christ, to bring to a close the present era and reconcile all things to himself—through the completion of redemption for the saved, and eternal judgment for the unsaved.
5A. How do we know the Bible is what it claims to be?

If the Bible isn’t true, it doesn’t matter where it came from or what translation one uses, or how much one gets from it. That means the question of truthfulness is a fundamentally important issue. When we ask someone who believes the Bible to be true, how they know it’s true, we get a variety of answers. For example, it’s not uncommon to hear some of the following reasons.

“My Sunday school teacher (or pastor) told me the Bible is true.”
Good for your Sunday school teacher or pastor! But did they tell you “how” they know the Bible is true—or did you simply accept an unsupported opinion?

“The Bible says its true.”
Okay, but unless you already knew it was true, you couldn’t trust what it says about itself—right? So, how did you know it was true, so you knew you could trust it when it said it was true? This reminds me of the following riddle.

Statement #1: The next statement is true.
Statement #2: The previous statement is false.
Question: Is the second statement true or false?

This riddle is guaranteed to give you a headache! But, it does illustrate the problem of “circular reasoning”—a common logical flaw. Unfortunately, if we say the Bible is true simply because it says so, that’s also circular reasoning. Nevertheless, while the Bible’s claim to be true isn’t proof, it is important, in that it invites the reader to consider the possibility that it is true—something people would not be obliged to do were the claim not made.

“The Bible can be proven to be true historically.”
It’s true that archaeological and historical research confirms the accuracy of the Bible, but can we conclude that the Bible is accurate in spiritual matters because it is historically accurate? Don’t you suppose that there are some secular books that are historically accurate, but which might not be reliable in spiritual matters?

“The Bible has been shown to be scientifically accurate.”
This is true, and probably much more significant than historical accuracy, though both are important. The reason scientific accuracy is so significant is that it reveals a state of knowledge that could not have been obtained through any ordinary means of discovery available at the time the Bible was written. In other words, if the Bible was written with scientific accuracy thousands of years ago, that would imply that knowledge was communicated to the biblical writers by someone who knew the truth about the way the universe works and its origin. So, couldn’t that someone be God? “Yes”—it could. But, a critic could simply claim that such knowledge could have come from advanced intelligent beings (extraterrestrials, for example), or they could claim that the information was gathered through time travel. While those are admittedly far-fetched objections, there are people who would make such objections, and it illustrates the problem of using scientific accuracy as a logical proof that the Bible is true.
“The Bible accurately predicts the future. Since only God could know the future, this attests to his authorship of the Bible.”
If one is looking for proof, this is about as good as it gets. We can definitely prove that details about future events were revealed in scripture with remarkable accuracy. In order for this to have happened, the biblical writers had to obtain this information from somewhere. A common tactic of those who seek to discredit the Bible is to “postdate” as many biblical prophecies as possible. (Postdating of prophecy means to assign a date for a prophecy that is later than the date of the supposed event prophesied. For example, critical scholars generally postdate the book of Daniel, claiming that the book was written after the prophesied events happened, but in such a way as to make it appear that the prophecies were written earlier, before the fact. The problem is that many prophecies are impossible to postdate, because there is strong historical evidence that the books in which they are contained were written well before the prophesied events occurred. The Isaiah 53 predictions of the death of the Messiah are a good example. While skeptics have attempted to cast doubt on the validity of some prophecies, they have been unsuccessful in explaining away the bulk of biblical prophecy. Fulfilled prophecy remains the best proof we have that God has spoken through the Bible. Nevertheless, God provides an even better way for us to know with absolute certainty that the Bible is his message to us.

The Bible is a “self-authenticating” message
What does “self-authenticating” mean? It means that when God speaks, those to whom he is speaking innately recognize his voice. Think of it this way, Jesus said in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” Have you noticed in your reading of the Bible that whenever God spoke to people, they seemed to recognize who was speaking? Since God’s communication to man is self-authenticating, it doesn’t require logical proofs. Those to whom God speaks, whether directly (in Bible times) or indirectly (through the reading of the Bible) will always know that God is speaking. However, evidences such as historical and scientific accuracy, and fulfilled prophecy can be useful in combating false allegations about the Bible (i.e., allegations that the Bible cannot be true because it isn’t accurate).

Because God authenticates his word to man directly, through the ministry of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, we can spend less time defending the Bible, and more time using it. Hebrews 4:12-13 says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” While it may be necessary at times for us to challenge the critic who charges that the Bible isn’t accurate, or that it doesn’t evidence supernatural character, our focus should be on using the Bible rather than defending it.
6A. How was the written word of God communicated to us?

Where did the Bible come from?

The question, “How can we know the Bible is true,” was a theological question. “Where did the Bible come from” is a historical question. Basically there are six steps in the delivery of God’s communication to us. They are:

1) Revelation  
   (God speaking)
2) Inspiration  
   (Man recording)
3) Canonicity  
   (The Church recognizing)
4) Transmission  
   (Men copying)
5) Translation  
   (Men translating)
6) Illumination  
   (The Holy Spirit giving understanding)

Let’s take a look at each of these six steps.

Revelation

There are two types of revelation referred to in theology; one is “natural revelation,” the other is, “special revelation.” Natural revelation is what is revealed about God and His work through nature, that is, through non-supernatural (natural) means. Special revelation is God disclosing (directly and supernaturally) things that man could not know by natural means; for example: God’s plans and purpose for His creation. Both kinds of revelation have limitations. Natural revelation is limited in subject matter and specificity—there is only so much that can be learned about God and His plans and purposes, through nature. Natural revelation is also limited by the fact that creation has been marred by sin. Nevertheless, there are some important truths that can be learned about God from nature, such as, his existence and power (cf. Rom. 1:20). On the other hand, special revelation is limited by man’s ability to comprehend the message. To give an analogy, God has to step-down the “voltage” of truth in order not to overload the recipients. He communicates truth, but in increments that man can receive. Special revelation also requires that man have access to the message. People who do not have the word of God cannot benefit from it directly. Some examples in the communication of special revelation occur in Genesis 20:1ff; Exodus 19:1ff; 1 Samuel 3:1-14; Daniel 7:1ff; Revelation 1:1ff (ff means “and the following verses”).

An often-asked question is whether or not God continues to give special revelation today as he did in Bible times. Historically, conservative Christianity has taken the position that the scriptures are now complete, and therefore, there is no need for additional special revelation. This position, which I personally believe to be correct, should be taken only as a general observation. God can speak anytime he pleases. Perhaps a more relevant question would be, “Are the revelatory gifts that existed in the first century Church (tongues, prophecy, and word of knowledge) part of the normative experience of the Church today?” To this question we can give a definitive answer: “No, they are not.” However, this does not mean that God could not, or does not give special revelation to individuals today. It simply means that such does not appear to be the normative experience of the present-day Church, in spite of what some individuals and church groups may believe. We will discuss this further under the ministry of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts.
Here are some of the ways God has revealed Himself to man:

1. In the material creation, Ps. 19:1-4
2. In man’s own nature, Acts 17:28-29
3. In providence, Deut. 4:33-35
4. In the experiences of God’s people, 1 Pt. 2:9; Philp. 3:10
5. Through direct (special) revelation (as in a voice, vision, dream, etc.), Gen. 6:13
6. In and through Jesus Christ, Jn. 1:18; 14:8-9; Col. 2:9

Special revelation differs from natural revelation in that it’s direct (i.e., immediate); that is to say, it comes to man directly from God through supernatural means rather than being mediated through nature. Actually, God has revealed himself in a number of ways, not just in the scriptures; however, the Bible contains a great deal of material that was given through special revelation. How does God communicate to man by special revelation? Revelation was given through the spoken word (Ex. 19:9; 1 Sam. 3:1-14; 2 Sam. 23:1-2), through dreams (Gen. 20:6; 37:5-9; Dan. 2:1-45; Joel 2:28-29), through visions (Gen. 15:1; 46:2; Isa. 1:1; 6:1; Ezek. 1:3), through His Son, Jesus Christ (Matt. 12:30-32), and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26; cf. Jn. 16:13-14). When we read the Bible, we get the impression that special revelation was fairly common in Bible times; however, that is not true. Special revelation was very rare in biblical history. Revelations from God occurred over only a relatively short period of several hundred years out of about six thousand years of history covered by the Bible. These revelations almost always occurred at a time when there was a major transition in God’s program for his people (usually at a dispensational transition)—for instance, at the call of Abraham, at Mt. Sinai, and during the ministry of Christ. God’s people sometimes went many hundreds of years with little or no new word from God.

Inspiration

Inspiration involves God guiding the human authors of scripture, so that using their own unique qualities, background, style and vocabulary, they composed and recorded God’s message without error, in the original autographs (i.e., in the original documents). The content of the message they recorded may have been derived from special revelation, natural revelation, history, personal experience, or the experiences of others; but no matter how the informational content was derived, only what God wanted to be said was recorded, such that the original manuscript of each inspired document was God’s word without error. This view of inspiration is usually referred to as “verbal-plenary inspiration.” The terms “verbal” and “plenary” are useful because they specify that: 1) the very words themselves are inspired (verbal), and 2) the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is inspired (plenary). The word “inspiration” is translated from the Greek word theopneustos, which is found in 2 Timothy 3:16 (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20-21). Theopneustos literally means, “God (theos) breathed (pneustos).” The idea is not that God breathed “on” the Word and somehow made it special, but that God actually “breathed out” the Word. The key scriptural support for the verbal-plenary view of inspiration is derived from the following observations.
Logical support for verbal-plenary inspiration

Assuming that God has communicated to man, verbal-plenary inspiration is the only reasonable method. Why? Because an intelligent God would certainly know that unless the communication was 100% inerrant (truth without error) there would be no way for man to ever sort out the truth from the non-truth. Therefore, it would have been completely illogical for God to allow his truth to be mixed with error in such a manner that the two could not be distinguished. If God has spoken, it is apparent that his communication must have been inerrant, and verbal-plenary inspiration and the dictation theory are the only two views consistent with inerrancy—and the dictation theory cannot be correct (for reasons that will be discussed below). One might ask why all the fuss about inerrant originals since we only have imperfect copies. The answer is that we know to within about one part per thousand what the original said, and it is infinitely better to have 99.9% of something that is 100% true, than to have 99.9% of something the truth of which can never be determined. If we can figure this out, surely an intelligent God would have anticipated this. Verbal-plenary inspiration is the only reasonable means by which God could have spoken to man.

Biblical support for verbal-plenary inspiration of the Old Testament

1. The Old Testament writers claimed to be speaking God’s Word. (Ex. 21:1; 32:16; Isa. 1:1-2; Jer. 1:1-2; Ezek. 1:3).

   a. He recognized the entire Old Testament (Jn. 5:39; Lk. 24:44-46), as well as all three of the major divisions of the Old Testament (Mk. 7:8-13; Matt. 13:13-14; Jn. 10:34-35) as the authoritative word of God.

   b. He quoted authoritatively from many Old Testament books (Genesis: Mk. 10:6-8; Exodus: Lk. 18:20; Numbers: Jn. 3:14; Deuteronomy, Leviticus: Lk. 10:26-28; Samuel: Mk. 2:25; Kings: Matt. 12:42; Psalms: Mk. 12:10; Isaiah: Lk. 4:17-21; Daniel: Matt. 24:15; Malachi: Matt. 11:10).


   d. He submitted himself to the authority of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-18; Lk. 18:31 [implied]).


   f. He used the Old Testament in such a way as to indicate his complete confidence in what it said (Matt. 22:23-33 cf. Ex. 3:6).

a. They quoted from, or alluded to most of the Old Testament books. (According to The Dictionary of Biblical Literacy, the book of Isaiah is referenced a total of 419 times in 23 different NT books, the Psalms are referenced 414 times in 23 NT books, Genesis is referenced 260 times in 21 NT books, Exodus is referenced 250 times in 19 NT books, Deuteronomy is referenced 208 times in 21 NT books, Ezekiel is referenced 141 times in 15 NT books; Daniel is referenced 133 times in 17 NT books, Jeremiah is referenced 125 times in 17 NT books, Leviticus is referenced 107 times in 15 NT books, and Numbers is referenced 73 times in 4 NT books—and this is only a partial listing. The book of Revelation draws information from 32 OT books, the book of Luke draws information from 31 OT books, the Gospel of John draws information from 26 OT books, Acts draws information from 25 OT books, the Gospel of Mark draws information from 24 OT books, Romans draws information from 23 OT books, Hebrews draws information from 21 OT books, 1 Corinthians draws information from 18 OT books, the Epistle of James draws information from 17 OT books, and the Epistle of 1 Peter draws information from 15 OT books. This is only a partial listing.)

b. Both Jesus and the NT writers referred to many OT characters as historical. (Again, according to The Dictionary of Biblical Literacy, David is referred to 1118 times in the NT, Moses is referred to 740 times, Aaron is referred to 339 times, Saul is referred to 338 times, Abraham is referred to 306 times, Solomon is referred to 295 times, Jacob is referred to 270 times, Joseph is referred to 208 times, Joshua is referred to 197 times, Job is referred to 137 times, Jeremiah is referred to 136 times, Samuel is referred to 135 times, and Isaac is referred to 127 times—and again, this is only a partial listing.)

c. The New Testament writers referred to the Old Testament as “scripture” (by which they meant, “divinely authoritative writings”) (Acts 17:11; Rm. 1:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:16).

d. They attributed the Old Testament to the Holy Spirit. Note the following instances:

Psalm 110 cf. Mark 12:36
Psalm 41:9 cf. Acts 1:16
Psalm 2 cf. Acts 4:24-26

Support for the verbal-plenary inspiration of the New Testament

1. Jesus pre-authenticated (pre-validated) the New Testament.

Since the New Testament wasn’t written until after Jesus ascended to heaven, it was necessary for him to “pre-authenticate” it before it was written.
Note that he validated all three of the major sections of the New Testament.

*History* (Matthew-Acts); Pre-authenticated in John. 14:26
*Doctrinal/didactic* (Romans-Jude); Pre-authenticated in John. 16:13-15
*Apocalyptic [the future]* (Revelation); Pre-authenticated in John 16:13


   a. John (Rev. 1:1-2; 22:6)
   b. Paul (1 Cor. 2:13; 14:37; 1 Thess 2:13)
   c. Peter—in reference to Paul’s letters (2 Pet. 3:15-16)
   d. Jude (Jude 17,18)

**Some incorrect views of inspiration**

By now it shouldn’t surprise you that for every correct view, there are several erroneous views. (Really, what do you think Satan does in his spare time—play golf?)

1. *Natural inspiration*: The Bible was written by men of genius, but it’s still just a human work, and therefore it is no more likely to be true than any other work of genius.

2. *Mystical inspiration*: The biblical authors were “inspired” in the sense that people today are inspire to do great things—like painting or poetry.

3. *Conceptual inspiration*: God gave the biblical authors the ideas, and they developed them.

4. *Partial inspiration*: Some parts of the Bible are more inspired than other parts, and some parts simply aren’t inspired at all. This view allows for some portions of the Bible to be inspired, and infallible, and for other portions to be uninspired, and fallible; but it doesn’t give us any way to determine one portion from another, which if true, would cast doubt on the validity of the entire Bible. Such a view appeals to those who want to develop their own brand of religion by eliminating anything with which they disagree. Incidentally, if the reader gets to decide which portions of the Bible are authoritative, is it the Bible or the reader that is the authority?

5. *Dictation inspiration*: God dictated every word and the human writers were merely transcriptionists. While this view sounds good on the surface, since it doesn’t allow for any errors in the original autographs, it is an overly simplistic view, because each individual human author used his own vocabulary and life experiences in the writing of the Bible, and that would not be what we would expect to see if the material were dictated.
Are copies of the original manuscripts inspired?

This is a particularly important question in light of the fact that we don’t have any of the originals. Strictly speaking, inspiration refers to the original composition and recording of the text (i.e., the autographs). A copy reproduces the inspired word of God to the extent that it accurately reproduces the autograph. We will talk more about textual criticism later, but textual criticism is the attempt to recover the precise wording of the autographs from the copies we have.

Canonicity

How do we know we have the right books in our Bible?

Have you ever wondered how the early Church knew which books should be included in the Bible (like Genesis, Isaiah, Romans, etc.) and which ones should be excluded (like Tobit, Judith, Baruch, and the Gospel of Thomas)? The question of which books ought to be regarded as divinely authoritative is called “canonicity.” The word “canon” means, “standard,” or “measure.” Canonical book are those that “measure up” to the standard of inspired scripture.

There is a body of non-canonical literature that comes from the intertestamental period, between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, which is referred to as “apocryphal” (i.e., “other writings”). Though this literature was not viewed by the Jews as scripture, it was sometimes included in early Greek translations of the OT since those documents were part of the larger body of Jewish literature, as seen from the Greek perspective; and the issue of authority was of less concern to non-Jews. Sadly, some of this apocryphal literature was ultimately adopted into the Roman Catholic Canon in the sixteenth century. A little late—don’t you think?

The real problem for the early Church came from literature produced in the post-apostolic era. Since even false teaching has to appeal to some basis of authority, many books first saw the light of day in the second and third centuries A.D. to support various unbiblical beliefs, usually concerning the nature of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, the material creation, the nature of evil, the fall of man, or redemption. This body of literature is often referred to as the NT apocrypha; however, most of these books were pseudepigraphal (forgeries) produced by Gnostics. (Gnosticism was an early Christian heresy that rejected the incarnation of Christ.) Because of the profusion of these spurious documents, it became necessary for the early Church to draw a line excluding such works from being used as authoritative support in theological disputes. The early Church in the second and third centuries was, quite literally, in danger of being overrun by Gnostic heresies. In the mid-second century, Valentinus, one of the leading Gnostics of his day, was almost elected to be the Bishop of Rome!

[Background on the Gnostics: For the most part, the Gnostics did not believe the God of the OT (Jehovah / Yahweh) was Jesus’ heavenly father. They believed the Jewish God of the OT was a powerful, but conceited, self-serving, and bungling angelic being who made a mess of things by thinking himself to be God. They believed the material world to be inferior to the spirit world and therefore rejected the union of God and man in the person of Christ. They also believed that Christ didn’t actually die on the cross, and that man is not in need of redemption, he only needs “enlightenment” to realize that he too is a part of the divine spirit (the original, and benevolent...}
Creator/Parent) and can return to the Divine Spirit, the true unknowable, eternal God, when he dies. Some Gnostics denied the reality of the material world, and most believed in some form of reincarnation. An integral part of the Gnostic religion was to learn the secret truths and signs that would allow one to pass the malevolent “gatekeepers” (powers and principalities) of this world when they died, so that they could ascend to the tenth heaven and be reunited with the Divine Spirit. They believed there to be a test at each level that must be passed in order to ascend to the next, otherwise one would be sent back to be reincarnated as another person and start all over. Since none of this fits with the Bible, Gnostics had to produce their own “scriptures.” Other than the fact that these books were obvious forgeries written under the names of the apostles long after they had died, can you see why the early Church rejected these books? By the way, virtually all of the “lost books of the Bible” referred to in the popular book The DeVinci Code are Gnostic books rejected by the early Church as heretical. Someone has said, “Those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it,” and that certainly seems to be the case with Gnosticism—virtually every false teaching within the umbrella of “Christianity” today (including: Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, and quasi-religious groups like Freemasonry, are all built on Gnostic teaching that was condemned by the early Church as inconsistent with the basic principles of the Christian faith. [Most Freemasons are unaware of the deep cultic roots of Freemasonry. They are told that Freemasonry isn’t a religion, but a fraternal order. Nevertheless, the history, ceremonies, and even place of meeting (which in times past were often referred to as “temples”) belie the fact that Freemasonry is a para-religious organization. Freemasons say that masonry isn’t a secret organization—but, “an organization with a secret.” Unfortunately, the secret, which is well-kept from lower order Masons, is that they belong to an organization that at the higher levels is completely incompatible with biblical Christianity. As an interesting sidelight, most people outside of Mormonism, and even some within, are unaware that most of the secret temple ceremonies of Mormonism were taken directly from Freemasonry. Joseph Smith and his family were very active Freemasons. For information on the connection between Freemasonry and Mormonism see the excellent work, One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church, by Richard Abanes]

Many people mistakenly think that some group of crusty old church leaders sat down and voted on which books they preferred, and that’s how we got our Bible. But that isn’t the way it happened. The target group to which each portion of scripture was addressed immediately recognized what they received as authoritative scripture. (This is true of both the Old and New Testaments.) As was said previously, for the most part the real issue facing the early church was weeding out the spurious material that appeared in the post-apostolic era, which was being used to support doctrines not found in, and which were contrary to the established teachings of the apostles as embodied in the scriptures the church had received from the beginning. While this sounds complicated, it was not as difficult a task as one might imagine, and while these documents created a lot of doctrinal confusion, the task of distinguishing them from the authoritative writings of the NT was fairly straightforward, and occurred with very little fanfare, so little in fact, that we have had some difficulty in reconstructing the process.

Don’t confuse a “list” of books with the Canon itself. Some scholars have suggested that the church didn’t have a canon until it had a list of books. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lists were merely tools developed to exclude spurious works from being proffered as authoritative; but list or no list, the early church knew what was
authoritative, which is why many of the forgeries drew upon biblical imagery and often quoted or alluded to biblical source material to make them seem more “biblical.”

Note the following examples of how scripture was immediately recognized as the word of God.

1. Moses' writings were placed beside the Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 31:24-29), the most holy place on earth at the time.


3. Peter, a contemporary of Paul, regarded Paul’s writings as scripture (2 Pet. 3:14-16).

In order to understand how we came to have the specific sixty-six books that are in our Bible, we need to look at the formation of the Old and New Testament canons individually.

The Old Testament Canon

The question of which books should be included in the Old Testament was fairly simple and was settled before Christ was born. Note the following observations:

1. Except for the Sadducees, who accepted only the books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Jewish people regarded as scripture the same thirty-nine books as the Protestant Church today—though they arranged them so that some books now split were combined (e.g., 1 & 2 Samuel, etc.).

2. The scriptures that Jesus used are the same as our present-day Old Testament. Jesus used these scriptures with confidence; don’t you think we can too?

3. The Old Testament apocryphal books (officially accepted by the Roman Catholic Church since the sixteenth century) were never accepted as scripture by Jesus, or the Jewish people. They came into the Roman Catholic Church via the Jerome (Latin) translation. However, Jerome’s own testimony was that those books were not considered by the Jews to be scripture and that he was reluctant to include them. (Sometimes we actually do need to follow our gut feeling—too bad Jerome didn’t.)

4. Early quotations of the apocryphal books by some early Church leaders (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Cyprian—none of whom were Old Testament or Hebrew scholars) occurred at a time when the extent of the Old Testament canon was not well understood, especially by non-Jewish religious leaders, and some may have mistakenly thought that these books had been an accepted part of the Hebrew canon, when in fact they never were.
The New Testament Canon

Since the letters which were written to the early church were scattered over the Roman Empire, it took a bit of time for the local churches to assess what they had and to eliminate common letters from those received as the inspired word of God. There was very little pressure to do this until suspicious documents began to show up in doctrinal disputes, then it became necessary to come up with official lists of acceptable inspired source material.

It is extremely important to understand that the early church did not determine which books would become scripture; they merely endeavored to recognize which books were already received by the church at large as scripture. They did this by developing simple tests that could be applied to a disputed book. (The thirty-nine books of our OT and the twenty-seven books in our NT were not in dispute.) While it was not necessary for a book to meet all of the criteria, they were expected to meet most of it. The criteria wasn’t pulled out of thin air, rather it was derived from what the Church already knew about the character of scripture from the books of undisputed authenticity. (You can think of the criteria for canonicity as a kind of weed killer. Weed killer doesn’t produce grass; it just gets rid of weeds.)

The criteria the early church used to “weed out” inferior documents

1. *The test of inspiration*
   Questions: 1) Does the book claim to be the word of God *(i.e., revelatory, and/or inspired)*?  
   2) Is the message of the book consistent with inspiration?

2. *The test of authorship*
   Question: Is the book the product of a recognized (accredited) representative of God, such as: a prophet, apostle, or an aid of one of these (such as: Luke {an aid to Paul}, and Mark {an aid to Peter})?

3. *The test of genuineness (authenticity)*
   Question: Are there good reasons to believe the book was written in the time period and by the author from whom it purports to have come—or does it show signs of being fraudulent?

4. *The test of truth*
   Question: Are the factual assertions true?  
   (Obviously, a book that asserts what is false cannot be inspired.)

5. *The test of testimony*
   Question: Is there credible historical testimony to the fact that the book had been generally recognized as authoritative by God’s people—whether the Jewish people (for the OT), or the Church (for the NT)?

6. *The test of authority*
   Question: Does the book claim divine authority? (For example: “Thus saith the Lord…”)

*Know What You Believe! —God and the Bible 1.45*
7. *The test of agreement*
   
   Question: Is the book in complete doctrinal agreement with books of undisputed authenticity?

   Virtually all of the Gnostic literature is excluded by this criterion, which accounts for much of the spurious literature of the second and third centuries A.D. (“Guilt by association” would justifiably exclude any remaining Gnostic literature; after all, it seems highly unlikely that God would use heretics as a vehicle to deliver truth, right?)

8. *The test of fulfillment*
   
   Question: Is there evidence of bonafide fulfilled prophecy in the book?

9. *The test of endurance*
   
   Question: Is the message of the book universal? In other words, does the book address issues vital to people everywhere and in every generation?

10. *The test of spirituality*
    
    Question: Is the message consistent with what we know of the majesty of God? In other words, can we conceive of the message coming from God? God certainly might say things that would shock us, but he is always holy in all of His ways, and his communications will always reflect his high moral character.

**Transmission**

Given that God has communicated to man (revelation) and that man under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has been able to accurately and faithfully record that message without error (including no additions or deletions), how do we know that the Bible we have today is anything close to the original that was written in the autographs? Couldn’t people have changed it over the years? The answer is: “Yes.” In fact, of the thousands of ancient manuscripts we have of the Bible (both Old Testament and New Testament) no two are identical. Providentially, however, in most cases the differences are minor and it’s possible to determine the correct reading. We are aided by the fact that we have so many manuscripts to compare. There are about five thousand early Greek manuscripts, or portions of manuscripts, of the New Testament alone. That’s a lot of material to work with! Besides, many of the differences are simply alternate spellings or accidents like skipping a line of text. Remember, these manuscripts were all copied by hand, and spelling was not uniform since there were no dictionaries.

**Textual Criticism**

How do Bible scholars determine which of the manuscripts are best, and how do they resolve conflicts between those manuscripts? These questions take us into a very controversial area of biblical studies known as, “textual criticism.” Textual criticism is the branch of biblical studies that deals with discovering the most accurate reading of the biblical text (that which is closest to the original autograph). Scholars who engage in textual criticism usually specialize in the study of either the Old Testament or the New Testament.
Testament. Many Christians are suspicious of the field of textual criticism, and rightly so. Most scholars who work in this field do not believe in inspiration, and that is bound to show up in some of their conclusions. Nevertheless, textual criticism is a necessary endeavor, since we don’t have any of the original documents. We simply have to be careful to do our homework, and make sure the textual critic’s conclusions are sound.

Anyone who has ever made an attempt to decide which is the best reading of the biblical text has practiced some form of textual criticism. Even the translators of the King James Bible practiced textual criticism. (This fact is not well known, but if you read the notes of those who worked on the various committees in preparing the KJV, you will see that they had sharp disputes about the reading of the Greek texts.) However, modern textual criticism, as a scholarly and quasi-scientific endeavor, began in the eighteen hundreds with the work of Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort. Neither of these men believed in verbal-plenary inspiration. Nevertheless, they laid a framework that is still used today (with varying degrees of modification).

Some of the basic principles used in textual criticism

1. Because manuscripts, when copied, tend to get longer with each copy, the shorter reading is usually more likely to be closest to the original. (However, there may be good reasons for accepting the longer version.) You may be asking how these manuscripts got longer when copied. The answer is that scribes often placed explanatory notes in the margins of the manuscripts, later copyists, thinking these were corrections of omissions, simply put the marginal notations right in the text itself.

2. Since copyists tend to smooth out difficult readings, the awkward wording might be closer to the original. Obviously this has to be taken with a dose of common sense. It doesn’t mean that if you have a manuscript that really butchers the text, it’s the best version. It simply means that we should be aware of signs of later editing.

3. The variation in reading that most naturally accounts for how the other variation in reading occurred is probably the best. This means that if reading “b” could have come from making a simple mistake in copying reading “a,” then reading “a” is probably closer to the original. (This may not be “rocket science,” but it is good detective work!)

4. The variation that best exemplifies the style and vocabulary of the author and best fits with the context is probably the best reading. (Obvious, right?)

Now, if we take any of these principles to an extreme, we could reach an absurd conclusion. Obviously, they are only guidelines and have to be applied with a large measure of common sense and sensitivity to both the content and context of the text.

The reliability of the modern Hebrew and Greek texts (used by scholars for translation)

Since our translations are made from the Hebrew and Greek texts, those translations cannot be any more accurate than the texts from which they are translated. So, the question of the reliability of our Hebrew and Greek texts is of enormous importance.
Observations on the present day Hebrew text (Old Testament)

The present day Hebrew text is based on the Masoretic Texts dating to about A.D. 900. Until fairly recently we didn’t have any way to check the accuracy of the Masoretic Texts, since they were the oldest manuscripts we had. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940’s changed that. (The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of ancient manuscripts dating from about 150 B.C. to about A.D. 70. They were hidden in caves southeast of Jerusalem near the Dead Sea, where they remained until their recent discovery.) Contained within the Dead Sea Scrolls collection are a number of ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, much older than the Masoretic Texts. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls gave scholars the opportunity to check the accuracy of the Masoretic Text to see if they had changed over the thousand-year period of hand copying from 150 B.C. to A.D. 900. What was discovered was that over that period of time the copying of the Old Testament resulted in very insignificant alterations of the text. This was good news. If the Hebrew manuscripts could be copied from 150 B.C. to A.D. 900 with only minor variation, it isn’t unreasonable to assume that they were copied from the time of their original composition with similarly great accuracy (after all, the original compositions were only written 250 to 1250 years prior to the date of some of the oldest Dead Sea Scrolls).

Regarding the comparison of the DSS (Dead Sea Scrolls) texts to the Masoretic (MT), of the 166 Hebrew words in Isaiah 53, only 17 letters (letters—not words) were different. Ten of these deviations were the result of variations in spelling and four more were minor stylistic variations having no significant affect on the reliability of the text. The remaining three letters comprise the word “light,” which somehow became appended to verse eleven. The reading of the Old Testament text is probably as settled as it’s going to be—unless more, very old manuscripts are discovered.

Observations on the present day Greek text (New Testament)

The reading of the Greek New Testament is well attested. Today we have over 24,000 early Greek manuscripts and translations of the New Testament. Although much of this material is fragmentary (not a complete manuscript), it is nonetheless an astounding quantity of material from which to determine the original reading of the text. Of these 24,000+ documents (or fragments), approximately 5,300 are Greek manuscripts (MMS); 10,000 are early Latin translations of the New Testament, and about 9,300 are other early translations.

No other ancient manuscript is as well attested as the New Testament. New Testament scholars who study the transmission of the New Testament text believe that 99.9% of the text of the original is now well established. This means that only about one word in one thousand is in serious question (and none of those in question has any significant doctrinal impact). Also, no other ancient document has so many manuscripts so close to the time of actual composition (see the table above). The abundance of early manuscript evidence means that we can be confident we know the original wording of the New Testament (at least within 99.9%).
The New Testament in Comparison to Other Ancient Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Date of Composition</th>
<th>Oldest Copy</th>
<th>Time Span</th>
<th>Number of Copies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.T.</td>
<td>A.D. 40-100</td>
<td>A.D. 125</td>
<td>25 yrs.</td>
<td>24,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer</td>
<td>900 B.C.</td>
<td>400 B.C.</td>
<td>500 yrs.</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>347 B.C.</td>
<td>A.D. 900</td>
<td>1200 yrs.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>322 B.C.</td>
<td>A.D. 1100</td>
<td>1400 yrs.</td>
<td>49 (of any one work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacitus</td>
<td>A.D. 100</td>
<td>A.D. 1100</td>
<td>1000 yrs.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not all copies are the same age.

The present day textual controversy

You may already be aware that there is a controversy within some circles over whether we should be using the “received” Greek text (Textus Receptus), or the more recent “eclectic” texts (produced by comparison of a larger body of manuscript evidence). Here’s a quick run-down of the history of the Greek New Testament.

The earliest copies of the Greek text were probably made for personal use, by non-professional copyists. Naturally, since these manuscripts were made by hand, over the years variations arose between manuscripts. Geographic isolation resulted in the development of manuscript families. (If you want a biological comparison, think about how isolated gene pools results in phenotypic manifestations—that helps a lot, right?) So, these manuscripts (reflecting certain family characteristics) were copied down to the modern era. However, the invention of the printing press changed everything. Now identical copies could be made, and made, and made—get the picture? Well, after the printing press was invented, everyone wanted a Bible, so the Bible was the first book to be printed. It was a large Latin (Vulgate) edition published in 1456. They were very beautiful, only forty-seven copies are known to survive.

The work on the first Greek edition, eventually called the Complutensian Polyglot (a multi-language, parallel version), was begun in 1502, but the book wasn’t published until 1522 (some twenty years in the making). Meantime, a Swiss printer by the name of “Froben” heard about the preparations to publish a Greek text and thought it would be great if he could beat the competition to the draw, so he contacted a scholar by the name of Erasmus, (the same Roman Catholic scholar who was Martin Luther’s nemesis). Erasmus hurriedly put together a Greek text for publication. Because of the time factor, Erasmus was limited to very few manuscripts (only seven), none of which contained the complete text of the New Testament. In fact, his only manuscript of Revelation lacked the last six verses, so Erasmus translated those verses from Latin back into Greek (a retrograde process). The entire project took from July 1515 to March
1516 (only eight months, including the hand typesetting and printing)—and included Erasmus’ own Latin translation of the text! It was truly a “whirlwind” production. Although the Complutensian project was begun thirteen years before Erasmus started his work, it wasn’t published until 1522, six years after Erasmus’ text came off the presses. (I’ll let you guess who did the more thorough job.) The short of things is that Froben and Erasmus beat everyone else to press, and Erasmus’ Greek text became the first to be published. Four editions of the Greek text (based on Erasmus’ work) were published by Robert Estienne between 1546 and 1551. His third edition was the first to contain a list of textual variations. Theodore Beza published nine editions of the Greek text (again based on Erasmus’ edition and subsequent editions that were printed by Robert Estienne) between 1565 and 1604. The Elzevir brothers published seven editions of the Greek text between 1624 and 1678 as a commercial venture. The introduction to the second edition contained the following statement, “You have therefore the text now received by all, in which we give nothing altered or corrupt.” Although this notice was merely a statement affixed by the commercial printer, the words “received text” stuck, and hence this text and subsequent editions became known as the “Textus Receptus.”

Although the Textus Receptus came to be held by most as the text of the Greek New Testament, work on the text of the New Testament didn’t stop. Some scholars continued to believe it was possible to derive an even more accurate text by comparing more manuscripts and by applying a little sound reasoning. These scholars continued to work, and in 1707 John Mill published a Greek text based on more than a hundred manuscripts. However, by this time any challenge to the “received text” was viewed as almost heretical.

Johann Albrecht Bengel published a Greek text in 1734. Bengel made a few changes to the Received Text (most of which had already be suggested in the footnotes of prior editions). Bengel also included a critical apparatus in his edition that compared and classified variant readings and rated those readings as superior/inferior. Bengel seems to have been the first to state that more difficult readings are more likely to be original than easier readings. As such, Bengel is viewed by some as being the father of modern textual criticism.

Johann Jakob Wetstien published a Greek text in 1752 using the Textus Receptus, but offering variant readings. Karl Lachmann, in 1831, completed the first edition of the Greek text to completely depart from the Textus Receptus and start from a comparison of older sources. It was not well received. By this time the Textus Receptus had become firmly established. Other such texts were published by Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (1879) and Constantine Tischendorf (1841-1872). In 1882 two Cambridge scholars, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort published an edition, and along with it, a volume on the principles of textual criticism used in their work. There was a reaction to Westcott and Hort’s text by those who were suspicious of their underlying principles. This was exacerbated by the fact the neither Westcott nor Hort believed in verbal inspiration. Since that time, numerous critical texts have been published—and they all share a basic conviction that comparison of the manuscripts using a set of reasonable principles will lead closer to the original reading of the text.

Basically, the present day controversy continues to revolve around which Greek text ought to be used for translation and study. One school of thought holds that the Textus Receptus should be used because it was translated from superior manuscripts (i.e., manuscripts in the “Western” family of texts—the Western Text was the dominant
manuscript family in the Western Church—the Roman Catholic Church—through the Middle Ages). By far the majority of present day Bible scholars reject the notion that the western manuscripts are superior, and therefore conclude that we can, and ought to attempt to refine our understanding of the ancient Greek text of the New Testament by comparing the readings to older manuscripts and applying the principles of textual criticism.

People who are committed to the Western Text family and the Textus Receptus, which was derived from those manuscripts, generally argue two points. 1) They claim that the Western Text must be superior, otherwise, “Why would God have let the church follow an inferior text of the New Testament for so long?” 2) They point out the fact that many, perhaps most, of the scholars who have worked in deriving the “eclectic” texts are not theologically conservative (i.e., they neither believe in verbal inspiration, nor in the historic doctrines of the faith). Of course both of these arguments are illogical. In the case of the first argument, few claim that the western text is “bad,” they simply believe that it represents only one family of texts—which is a point upon which all are agreed. Secondly, the same argument could be turned around and one could ask, “Why would God give the Western Church the best manuscripts and leave the rest of the Church (in Asia and North Africa, for example) to use inferior texts?” We also need to understand that during the Middle Ages the study of the Greek text was given extremely little importance in the Roman Catholic Church. The Latin was viewed as the authoritative version, and if there was any question, the Pope, as “Christ's representative on earth,” was available to render an authoritative answer—so they believed. The fact that the majority of the texts transmitted through the Roman Catholic Church were of the Western Text family is of little value as an argument—unless perhaps one happens to be Catholic. As to the second argument, it is true that many scholars involved in the production of the eclectic texts were not theologically orthodox. However, this is simply an ad hominem (circumstantial) argument. If it can be demonstrated that specific decisions on the reading of the text were skewed based on these men’s theological bias, this would be a valid argument (and I’m not saying that it never happened); however, in most cases the reasons for choosing one variation over another are clearly stated and reasonable. In cases where the reader may feel that the editor’s reading is not correct, one is free to disagree. (All eclectic versions of the Greek text now contain a “critical apparatus” that allows the reader to know why a particular reading was chosen, and what alternate readings can be found in the body of manuscript evidence.) The choice to use a translation based on one or the other Greek texts should have no impact on one’s theology. In spite of all the ruckus, the Greek texts aren’t that different—from a purely theological point of view.

Translation

The last step in making scripture available in other languages (such as English) is translation. Without translation we would either have learn Hebrew and Greek, or we wouldn’t be able to read the Bible. In many ways, translation is the trickiest step in the sequence we have been describing. The autographs were, of course, free of errors. As the manuscripts were copied over the centuries, various errors crept in. As we have seen, most of these errors can be identified and corrected through textual criticism. However, the very nature of translation makes this step particularly vulnerable to the introduction of errors. The reason is that translators are beset with an extremely difficult task, and they must use a fair amount of discretion in the way they choose to translate. You may ask why they can’t just give a “word for word” rendering from the Hebrew and
Greek, and let the reader figure out what is being said. (Interlinear translations actually do this.) But that is not as good a solution as it might appear. Both Hebrew and Greek employ entirely different grammars than English. Simply rendering each successive word into English would result in tremendous confusion, because it would strip away the grammar, which is the key to understanding how the words are used. It would be like receiving a coded message without knowing the code.

The big problem in translation—finding balance

Translators generally try to produce a translation that strikes a balance between two objectives: accuracy and readability. Unfortunately these two objectives often exist on opposite ends of the translation spectrum. Here’s the way it usually works in translating either Hebrew or Greek into another language. The more accurate the translation, the harder it is to read (especially if the translation is English). The reason is that this type of translation tends to render the text as close as possible to the original language structure, and that structure is often unfamiliar to the modern reader (more so to English readers, since English sentence structure and grammar is very different than in either Hebrew or Greek). On the other hand, translations that are highly readable tend to track poorly with the original structure. Do you see the problem? The more precise the translation, the more difficult it is to read, and the more readable it is, the less precise it is likely to be. Now you see why we have so many new translations—everyone thinks they can do a little better job at hitting just the right balance.

The Problem of “Balance” Between Accuracy and Readability

How to identify a good translation

How does one go about finding the best translation for use in reading and studying scripture? The following guidelines are helpful.

1. A good translation should be just that—a translation. Don’t confuse a translation with a paraphrase. A paraphrase is a restatement of scripture in someone’s own words (the goal being to make the Bible easier to
understand). The Living Bible and The Message are examples of paraphrases. Unfortunately, paraphrases are interpretative restatements of the text, rather than translations. So, while you may think you’re getting the word of God, what you’re actually getting is what someone thinks the word of God is saying, and that might be accurate, or not. Paraphrases can be helpful when used correctly, as a study-aid along side one’s Bible, (i.e., use it like you would use a commentary).

2. A good translation should be readable. If one can’t understand the translation they are using, their reading and study will be less productive than it could be with a more understandable version. There is also a caveat here for those who prefer the good old King James Version. While through patience and effort you may come to understand King James English well, chances are, the people you seek to win on the street will not, and if they don’t, you might as well be quoting Bible verses to them in French, so consider not only your preferences, but who you will be ministering to when deciding on a translation. While the word of God doesn’t change, languages do, and we must keep current or risk the danger of failing to communicate to our culture.

3. A good translation should reflect a high degree of theologically conservative scholarship. Let’s face it, some translational decisions hinge on the underlying theology of the translator. (Theology is the ultimate context for every translator.) So, if the Bible translators are theologically off base, it isn’t likely that their translation is going to be “on target.” The Revised Standard Version is an example of a translation made by scholars who allowed their unbelief in miracles to negatively bias their translation.

4. Beware of translations made by one person. The best check on any translation is that several qualified translators came to agreement on the correct rendering. One-person volumes may, however, be good study-aids to use along side your Bible for comparison.

5. This last point is likely to be controversial—but a good translation should take advantage of the most recent advances in the knowledge of Hebrew and Greek and in textual criticism. Many people incorrectly think that we know less about biblical languages today than did people in the past. After all, were they not closer to Bible times? Actually the opposite is true. There are more scholars working with more ancient source material today than at any other time in history. Only one hundred years ago scholars thought that the Greek of the New Testament was a unique “biblical Greek” (some called it “Holy Ghost Greek”). Today, having discovered tens of thousands of secular documents from ancient times, we know that the Greek of the New Testament was the international language of the first century (in the western world); it’s called koinā”—or “common” Greek, and those documents have taught us much about the meanings of words, and even the grammar itself.

If you’re still uncertain, try the proven method—it’s guaranteed to work: ask someone whose spiritual integrity you trust, to recommend a Bible for you.

*Unjustified criticism of some recent translations*
There are some recent translations that have been justly criticized—the Revised Standard Version, for instance. However, not all of the criticism leveled at recent translations is justified. More concerning is criticism of the New American Standard Version and the New International Version, both of which are excellent, and theologically conservative translations. Numerous books and pamphlets have been published that attempt to find a pattern in these versions of denying some fundamental truth, such as the deity of Christ. These arguments tend to be of the "straw man" type, usually leveled by those who believe in the superiority of the Textus Receptus and the King James Version based on the TR. There are some passages in the KJV that emphasize Christ’s deity where it is not emphasized in the NASB or the NIV; however, this is often because the NASB and the NIV follow an older version of the Greek text which reflects less Middle Ages embellishment (from a copyist who apparently felt that what the text said about the deity of Christ wasn’t sufficient, and added a little extra support here and there). What these folks never seem to mention in their writings are the numerous instances in which the more recent translations do emphasize the deity of Christ, sometimes much more clearly than the KJV—rather strange wouldn’t you think, if they were trying to minimize Christ’s deity? Check the following passages for yourself in the NASB and the NIV: John 1:1-2; 5:17-18; 8:24,56-58 10:30-33; 12:45; 14:7-8; Acts 20:28; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:6; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:6-12; Revelation 1:8. You’ll find they teach the deity of Christ very clearly.

Illumination

The Bible is a book about spiritual things, and we need the help of God’s Spirit to understand them. Paul teaches this principle in 1 Corinthians 2:9-16. Needless to say, anything in our life that interferes with the work of the Holy Spirit has the potential to keep us from understanding and appreciating the message of the Bible.
7A. The modern rejection of the Bible: Radical criticism

Perhaps this material ought to have been presented earlier, however, I have placed it here to limit confusion, since it’s better to learn the truth before learning about error. Not all Bible scholars believe that the Bible is a book inspired by God. Some believe, and teach, that the Bible is a purely human book, natural rather than supernatural. The seeds of unbelief run all the way back to the early Church. There have always been those who refuse the Bible and reject Christ. (These two traits always run together.) However, from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century there was an explosion of unbelief. Christianity was attacked from all sides by men who viewed it as an obstacle to the secular, and amoral world in which they wished to live. They knew that as long as the orthodox doctrines of Christianity served as the foundations of society, they could never have a purely secular world. So, they did a very clever thing—they became professors of religion! First they introduced doubts about the authorship (and inspiration) of the Bible. Having eroded the foundation of Christian belief, every Christian doctrine was then opened to contradiction. I don’t know if you’ve figured this out yet, but the simple truth is, without the Bible there is no Christianity. Of course, the Church didn’t stand by idly while this was happening. Those churches that were not caught up in this unbelief continued to teach the truth such that we now have two divergent streams of Christianity. One stream traces its roots all the way back to the teachings of the Bible. The other stream, which began to diverge in the sixteenth century, has veered more and more into unbelief and the denial of biblical truth.

The good news is that the truth has universally prevailed at both the biblical and intellectual levels. Those who know the truth are on solid ground, and have nothing to fear from those carrying the banner of unbelief. The bad news is, most Christians are so ignorant of the truth that they allow those in unbelief to intimidate them anyway. It is mystifying why countless conservative, Bible believing, God fearing churches send a fresh crop of young fodder off to theologically liberal, post-Christian colleges and public universities each year, totally unprepared to meet the contradictions of unbelief they will face.

The Documentary Hypothesis

The documentary hypothesis is a theory which states that the first five books of the Bible (Genesis-Deuteronomy) were written, not as the Bible claims, by Moses (and completed by Joshua, Moses’ assistant) in the late fifteenth to early fourteenth centuries B.C., but by various groups of writers (designated as groups “J,” “E,” “D,” and “P”) sometime between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C. Now, is this really worth getting into a scrap about? Absolutely! Everything that comes after these first five books presumes their trustworthiness. That means that if these books are not what they purport to be, the Bible is not God’s Word, and Jesus and all the others who quoted so confidently and authoritatively from these books were ignorant and misguided. The documentary hypothesis is an open attack on the roots of the Christian faith.

It is incredible that a theory that has been so thoroughly refuted on every point is still being taught in institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, it is being taught, and most students who hear it in college are hearing it for the first time, so naturally they assume that their university professor knows something that their pastor or Sunday school teacher doesn’t know, or doesn’t want them to know.
The seeds of radical criticism—the denial of the unity and integrity of scripture—can be seen in the writings of H. B. Witter, the first to assert that Genesis 1-2 contains two parallel accounts of creation. Witter suggested that the names applied to God in these accounts could be used to distinguish the underlying source documents from which they originated (assuming such documents ever existed). However, it was a French physician by the name of Jean Autruc who formalized the first documentary theory, in his book Conjectures Concerning the Original Memoranda which it Appears Moses Used to Compose the Book of Genesis. Autruc suggested there were actually three source documents from which the Genesis material was derived, and that each could be identified through the usage of the names applied to God, since (as he believed) each source document employed a distinct name for God. Autruc did, however, believe that Moses was the complier and editor of the book of Genesis. J. C. Eichhorn introduced Autruc’s ideas to Germany with the publication of his introduction to the Old Testament in 1780-83. Eichhorn expanded Autruc’s theory on source document identification to include not only the names of God, but other literary consideration as well (style, vocabulary, etc.). In 1800 A. Geddes, a Roman Catholic priest dismissed Autruc’s theory, suggesting that instead of a few source documents being edited by Moses, the book of Genesis was a collage of many fragments pieced together by a redactor (editor) some five hundred years after Moses death. Between 1802-05, John Vatter, a German, attempted to demonstrate the gradual development of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the OT) from a number of fragments, at least thirty-eight. Although Vatter believed that some of the fragments must have come from Moses’ time, the Pentateuch as we know it would not have been compiled until early in the sixth century B.C.. Heinrich Ewald, disagreed with this fragmentary view and instead proposed that the basis for the first six books of the Bible (he included the book of Joshua) was a writing which he called the “Elohist” writing [“E” document]. He further proposed that a parallel account arose which used the name “Jehovah” instead of “Elohim” (“J” document). Later, Ewald proposed that a subsequent editor took portions from the “J” document and inserted them into the original “E” document. From this point the soup gets very thick. However, in 1845 Ewald rejected his own theory, and instead suggested that five narrators wrote the Pentateuch over a period of seven hundred years. The last narrator, living at about 790-740 B.C., completed the work. Ewald held that Deuteronomy was a later addition to the Pentateuch, added around 500 B.C.

Herman Hupfeld, in 1853, attempted to show that there were four distinct documents that were combined to form the Pentateuch (“P”—a pre-Elohistic source, “E,” “J,” and “D”—the source of Deuteronomy {in that chronological order}). In the 1860’s Karl Graf reversed Hupfeld’s chronological order to “J,” “E,” “D,” “P.” Julius Wellhausen took Graf’s theory, which had been modified by Abraham Kuenen and formulated what today has become the classic expression of the documentary hypothesis. According to Wellhausen, the earliest portions of the Pentateuch came from the “J” and “E” sources. From these a narrative work was compiled with a decidedly “J” flavor. Deuteronomy was compiled in Josiah’s time, and Ezra, in the fifth century B.C., added the priestly regulations, referred to as the Priestly Document (not to be confused with Hupfeld’s “P” source). Since Wellhausen’s time there have been numerous reformulations of the theory, most with more source documents. However, they all rest on the same basic assumptions.
Basic assumptions of the documentary hypothesis

1. The documentary hypothesis depends almost entirely on the highly subjective field of “source analysis” for its conclusions, while ignoring advancements in the field of ancient near-eastern archaeology. In many cases the presumptions of these radical critics are flatly contradicted by archaeological data.

2. The documentary hypothesis is built squarely upon an evolutionary view of religion, which out of hand dismisses any possibility of the supernatural. In that sense, it is akin to biological evolution—it must be believed, because to the antisupernaturalist, there is no alternative.

The documentary hypothesis is built on historical assumptions that have been proven to be false

The radical criticism of the Pentateuch was originally based on the assertion that these books could not have been written at the time and by the author indicated in the Bible (Moses and Joshua, in the fifteenth century B.C.), because Israel’s religion was not as advanced as the theology indicated in these books. (They must have used a crystal ball to discover this, since the Old Testament is the only source we have of Israel’s early religious development.) It is commonly asserted that monotheism did not develop in Israel until the eight century B.C., a premise now known to be false; therefore the Pentateuch (highly monotheistic) could not have been written in the fifteenth century. Contrary to this assertion, W. F. Albright, then chairman of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Archaeology at Johns Hopkins University, stated: “It is precisely between 1500 and 1200 B.C., i.e. in the Mosaic age, that we find the closest approach to monotheism in the ancient Gentile world before the Persian period.” (Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, p. 178.)

Another objection offered to Mosaic authorship is that the Pentateuch could not have been written in the fifteenth century B.C. because the Israelites had not yet attained the moral and civil/legal development reflected in those writings. So, how does the radical critic know this? You guessed it—he’s been to the crystal ball again! Archaeology has greatly illuminated our understanding on this issue. Millar Burrows, former professor of biblical theology at Yale University wrote: “The standards represented by the ancient law codes of the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites, as well as the high ideals found in the Egyptian book of the dead and the early wisdom literature of the Egyptians, have effectively refuted this assumption.” (What Mean these Stones? p. 46)

Higher critics have said that the Pentateuch could not have been written in the fifteenth century B.C. because the “Priestly Code” was far too advanced for that period. On this subject, Joseph P. Free, Professor of Bible and Archaeology at Wheaton College, and subsequently at Bemidji State College, has written: “Archaeological evidence, on the contrary, shows that there is no valid reason for dating the Levitical sacrificial laws late, for they appear in the Ugaritic material from the fourteenth century B.C.” (“Archaeology and Higher Criticism,” Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. 114.) In another work, Free says, “The Code of Hammurabi was written several hundred years before the time of Moses (c. 1500-1400 B.C.), and yet it contains some laws which are similar to those
recorded by Moses. In the light of this, the liberal has no right to say that the laws of Moses are too advanced for his time, and could not have been written by him." (Archaeology and Bible History, p. 161.)

It has been asserted that the Pentateuch could not have been written in Moses’ time because writing was virtually unknown in Palestine at that early date. This assertion has been proven to be false. We now possess a vast amount of written material dating from the second millennium before Christ. This includes the Ras Shamra tablets, Egyptian correspondence, the Mt. Sinai Inscriptions, and the Gezer Calendar.

British Assyriologist A. H. Sayce says regarding the late dating of Old Testament books: “...this supposed late use of writing for literary purposes was merely an assumption, with nothing more solid to rest upon than the critic’s own theories and presuppositions. As soon as it could be tested by solid fact it crumbled into dust. First Egyptology, then Assyriology, showed that the art of writing in the ancient East, so far from being of modern growth, was of vast antiquity, and that the two great powers which divided the civilized world between them were each a nation of scribes and readers. Centuries before Abraham was born Egypt and Babylonian were alike full of schools and libraries, of teachers and pupils, of poets and prose writers, and of the literary works which they had composed.” (Monument Facts and Higher Critical Fancies, pp. 28-29.)

Higher critics have asserted that the stories of the patriarchs are not historically reliable. Therefore, they must have been written at a later time—projecting the social and cultural conditions of that later period back into those stories. (Again, how does the critic know these stories are unreliable? Not because of any archaeological information, but simply because his hypothesis requires it.) Julius Wellhausen stated, “From the patriarchal narratives it is impossible to obtain any historical information with regard to the patriarchs; we can only learn something about the time in which the stories about them were first told by the Israelite people. This later period, with all of its essential and superficial characteristics, was unintentionally projected back into hoary antiquity and is reflected there like a transfigured mirage”. (Prolegomena to the History of Israel, translated by Black and Menzies, p. 331.) Wellhausen’s theory is that the historical details found in these narratives don’t fit so early a time period, so the stories must have been composed much later. Herman Schultz is even more blatant in his rejection of the historicity of the early Old Testament; he writes: “...Genesis is a book of sacred legend, with a mythical introduction. The first three chapters of it, in particular, present us with revelation-myths of the most important kind, and the following present us with mythical elements that have been recast more in the form of legend. From Abraham to Moses we have national legend pure and simple, mixed with a variety of mythical elements which have become almost unrecognizable. From Moses to David we have history still mixed with a great deal of legendary, and even partly with mythical elements that are no longer distinguishable. From David onwards we have history, with no more legendary elements in it than are everywhere present in history as written by the ancients.” (Old Testament Theology, p. 31.)

Why are proponents of the documentary hypothesis so adamant in rejecting the historicity of the early Old Testament? The answer is simple: Belief in the Bible and belief in the God of the Bible go together; since these critics have dispensed with God, it is only natural that they would seek to dispense with the Bible.
It should be pointed out that we know more now about the cultural, social, and religious history of the ancient Near East than at any other time in modern history. Archaeological discoveries in the last one hundred and fifty years have confirmed time and again the historical validity of the early Old Testament. Radical criticism’s baseless assertion of the historical unreliability of the early Old Testament is demonstrably false. The discovery of the Mari Tablets, the Ugaritic (Ras Shamra) texts, the Nuzi Tablets, and numerous Egyptian letters, have provided abundant validation of early Old Testament customs, civil and ceremonial practices, laws, and the names of people and places. The scholar who asserts that the early Old Testament is without historical validity demonstrates a deplorable level of ignorance in regard to the advancements made in ancient Near Eastern studies and archaeology. How did all this begin?

George Mendenhall, a professor of Near Eastern languages and literature at the University of Michigan, summarized how radical critical thinking got its start down the slippery slope when he said: “Wellhausen’s theory of the history of Israelite religion was very largely based on a Hegelian philosophy of history, not upon his literary analysis. It was an ‘a priori’ [before the fact] evolutionary scheme which guided him in the utilization of his sources.” (Biblical History in Transition, p. 36.) In other words, according to Mendenhall, Wellhausen didn’t base his views on a careful analysis of the facts, but rather being committed to an evolutionary and antisupernatural view of history, Wellhausen assumed that Israel’s religion, as well as the record of it, was simply the product of social, cultural, and religious evolution.

Refutation of the documentary hypothesis

You may be wondering why this theory is still being taught if it has been so thoroughly discredited. The answer is simple: proponents of the documentary hypothesis are antisupernaturalists, (many are atheists, agnostics, or deists). Just like their scientific counterparts, the biological evolutionists, they must deny any facts that are not consistent with naturalism.

There is an abundance of good source material available today to counter radical criticism of the Bible. While the inscriptive and general archaeological particulars are too involved to include in this brief presentation, the reader should consult the following works: A Ready Defense, by Josh McDowell; Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Volume 2, by Josh McDowell; When Critics Ask, by Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks; A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, by Gleason L. Archer, Jr. (for in-depth study).

A special note for university students

The detailed refutation of radical criticism (including the documentary hypothesis, form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, etc.) will require a careful study of the recommended books above. However, it has been my experience that the average university religion professor (whether at the undergraduate or graduate level), may actually know very little about these theories. Below are some suggestions on how to handle radical criticism.

1. Understand the implications of radical biblical criticism. If what the radical critics are saying is true, the Bible is false, and the people who wrote it were
either ignorant, or liars, or deceived; this would include Christ, since he obviously believed the Old Testament to be historically correct and written by the authors indicated by the text (cf., Matt. 8:4; Mk. 7:10; 10:4; 12:26; Jn. 5:45-46; 7:19-22).

2. Know with whom you are dealing. People who teach radical criticism of the Bible are destructive heretics (2 Pt. 2). They are fully aware of what they are doing. (The Bible calls them “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” Matt. 7:15).

3. Insist that your professor provide evidence for radical conclusions. Remember, simply quoting another critic isn’t evidence. [Have you noticed that when news reporters don’t have any hard facts they begin interviewing each other? Well, higher critics do the same thing. When they can’t produce facts, they simply quote other critics, who don’t have any more facts than they have.] Ask for documented archaeological, or inscriptive (i.e., “hard”) evidence from ancient sources that bears directly on the conclusions being proposed, then if evidence is offered, check it very carefully to see if it is being used properly, or if it is being misrepresented or misinterpreted.
8A. How do we deal with alleged Bible discrepancies?

There are some legitimate questions about the internal consistency of some biblical statements. Many of these discrepancies are easily dealt with; some are not, and warrant further research. Remember, the Bible is an ancient document, and we don’t know everything about it or the cultural and historical circumstances surrounding it. It is helpful to classify and deal with certain types of discrepancies as a group. [I highly recommend When Critics Ask, by Norman Geisler.]

Discrepancies involving the reporting of numbers

Numbers are very difficult to transmit in some ancient languages because of the absence of dedicated numeric symbols. This is especially the case in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. The books of Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings present two parallel accounts of Old Testament history very similar to the way the New Testament gospels present parallel accounts of the life of Christ. (If you would like to study these books in parallel form, A Synoptic Harmony of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, edited by James D. Newsome, Jr. will prove to be very helpful.) In reading through the parallel account of the Old Testament historical books you will notice a number of glaring discrepancies in the reporting of numbers. For example, 2 Samuel 8:4 says that David took seven hundred horsemen to battle, whereas the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 18:4 says he took seven thousand horsemen. The fact that many discrepancies in Old Testament numbers are even multiples of ten indicates to us that these discrepancies arose as a result of transmissional (scribal) errors in the copying of the text. Hebrew is notoriously difficult when it comes to accurately reproducing numbers. The good news is that we can usually figure out the correct number (especially where there is a parallel account), and since defective numbers often don’t make good sense in context. Discrepancies that have been introduced into the text during the long history of copying are not an indication that the original text was in error.

Discrepancies in computations

Most computational discrepancies result from the fact that the writer used a different computational system from the one we might expect. This is particularly true of computations involving dates. Where two ancient writers disagree in the computation of time, the first question we ought to ask is whether they used the same system. In ancient times many different calendars were in use, and dates were often reckoned from different starting points. An additional peculiarity of ancient time reckoning is that sometimes any portion of a day or year was reckoned as a whole day or year. Thus if a king ascended to the throne in the last month of a year, the very next month (the beginning of the first calendar year of his reign) would often be regarded as the second year of his reign; or alternatively, if a king died in mid-year, the entire year might be credited to him, and the new king’s reign might be reckoned from the beginning of the first full calendar year (this seems to be the case in Daniel 2:1). We cannot fault the Bible for such discrepancies. Standards of reckoning in ancient history were local and culturally based.

Discrepancies in quotations

Discrepancies in quotations are most often seen in New Testament quotations from the Old Testament. We need to bear in mind that often these quotations were not taken directly from the Hebrew Old Testament, but from the Greek Old Testament (the
LXX, called the “Septuagint”). The writers of the New Testament, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were not slavishly bound to the Hebrew original. (How could they be when they weren’t writing the New Testament in Hebrew?) But writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they captured the essence of the Old Testament passage to which they were referring. For the most part, exact quotations were not the norm. That’s simply the way they did things, and it was an acceptable practice.

**Ethical and theological discrepancies**

This class of alleged discrepancies is more difficult to deal with, but many of the so-called ethical and theological (doctrinal) discrepancies result from one of the following.

1. **A failure to understand the nature and purpose of God as revealed historically**
   Many people wonder how the same God who loves little children in the New Testament could have ordered the deaths of Canaanites women and children in the Old Testament. This apparent ethical discrepancy results from our failure to comprehend who God is (holy, just, and sovereign) and what he is doing (providentially restraining the influence of sin, so that his people can flourish). We cannot judge God in the way we would judge men. Because God is absolutely holy and sovereign his nature requires that he act justly, and he cannot fail to deal with sin, nor does he have to give an account to sinful men for his actions. We must not forget that our failure to understand God and what he is doing does not mean there is something wrong with him. The problem is in our own limited understanding.

2. **A failure to understand the biblical statements themselves**

3. **A failure to understand the culture of Bible times**
   Some apparent contradictions arise from a failure to understand the customs of the day in which the Bible was written. For example, the Bible provides extensive regulations on the treatment of slaves, but when understood in its cultural and historical context we see that God was not validating slavery, but extending protections to the victims of slavery. One might ask, “So why didn’t God just outlaw slavery the way he outlawed adultery?” Well, given the response to God’s prohibition of adultery, do you really think people would have given up their slaves? I suspect they would have preferred to give up their adultery than to give up their slaves! Instead, God worked through time to bring his people to the point of moral development where slavery could be seen for what it really is. God’s ways may seem slow, but they are guaranteed to work. In places where slavery was eradicated, that eradication wasn’t brought about by humanistic moralizing; in almost all cases, it was the result of the application of the principles taught in the Bible.
Study Questions

Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in the preceding text.

Introduction (pages 3-6)

1. The possibility of knowing anything about God and his plans and purposes is based upon what three propositions? (3)

2. Briefly state three reasons for developing a systematic understanding of biblical truth. (3)

3. What is meant by “progressive revelation?” (4)

4. Explain why even incomplete knowledge can be useful. (5)

5. Explain the difference between “induction” and “deduction” as it relates to biblical truth. (4)

6. Give an example of the use of induction and deduction in the development of a doctrine. (4-5)

7. What four questions should we continually ask ourselves in order to stay on track with the truth? (5)

8. Why is “connected” truth more useful than isolated truths? (6)

1A. How do we know God exists? (7-14)

9. What are the five key arguments against the existence of God? (7-10)

10. Explain how the existence of evil is used as an argument against the existence of an infinitely good and powerful God. Also, how could you counter this argument? (7-8)

11. Evaluate the statement: “Science can now (or will soon be able to) explain everything in terms of natural cause and effect, without God.” (8)

12. In light of the difficulty of defining “God,” how is it possible to talk about God in a meaningful way? (8-9)

13. Atheists claim they have valid objections to every argument for the existence of God. Assuming (for the sake of argument) that they are correct, why would this not prove atheism? (8)

14. How would you respond to the argument that “it is better not to believe in God, since belief in God often results in evil (religious wars, the Spanish Inquisition, etc.).” (7-8)
15. Give four arguments for the existence of God? (11-14)
16. State (in detail) why you believe in God.
17. Explain the cosmological argument for the existence of God. (11-13)
18. Explain the teleological argument for the existence of God. (13)
19. Explain the anthropological argument for the existence of God. (14)
20. Explain the moral argument for the existence of God. (14)
21. What do you think would be a good plan for witnessing to an atheist?

2A. **What kind of God do we worship?** (15-16)
22. Describe the Christian conception of God. (15)
23. What is pantheism? (15-16)
24. What do you think might be a good plan for witnessing to a pantheist?
25. What is deism? (15)
26. What do you think might be a good plan for witnessing to a deist?
27. Describe finite godism and polytheism. How are these views similar, and how do they differ? (16)

3A. **What is God like?** (17-30)
28. What is meant by the term, “non-communicable quality?” (17)
29. What is meant by the term, “communicable quality?” (17)
30. List the non-communicable qualities of God that were discussed. (17-23)
31. List the communicable qualities that were discussed. (23-38)
32. What is the difference between moral holiness and metaphysical holiness? (17-18, 23-24)
33. What is another term for metaphysical holiness? (17)
34. How old is God? (18-19)
35. What does “eternal” mean when used to describe God? (18-19)
36. What does “immutable” mean, when used to describe God? (19)

37. Describe the proof for the doctrine of the Trinity. (19-22)

38. What are three incorrect views with respect to the Trinity? (22-23)

39. What are four important observations based upon the fact that God is morally holy? (23-24)

40. Define “goodness” as it relates to the character of God. (24)

41. Define “righteousness” as it relates to the character of God. (24-25)

42. Why is anything untrue repugnant to God? Explain. (25)

43. Define “justice” as it relates to the character of God. (25)

44. What does “omniscience” mean? Give examples of the types of knowledge that God possesses. (26)

45. Can God do anything? Explain your answer. (Be careful.) (26)

46. What do we mean when we say that God is “personal?” (26-27)

47. What is God’s purpose (as expressed in the will of God) for creation? (28)

48. Define each of the three aspects of God’s will. (28-29)

49. Is everything that happens (even evil) in God’s will? Explain your answer carefully. (29)

50. How should your answer to question 49 (above) affect your view of life?

51. What is a non-predisclosing form of guidance? Give an example. (29-30)

52. What is the correct place for any Christian to start in finding God’s will in any situation? (29-30)

4A. What’s so special about the Bible? (31-34)

53. Assume you are writing a letter to a non-Christian. In one or two paragraphs explain why you believe the Bible to be unique. (You don’t need to write the whole letter, just the explanation of why the Bible is unique.) Make it really easy to understand; this person to whom you are written is not well educated and knows very little about the Bible. (31-32)

5A. How do we know the Bible is what it claims to be? (35-36)

54. Why is the scientific accuracy of the Bible of even greater significance than
historical accuracy?  (35)

55. Why are the Bible’s accurate predictions of the future the best evidence of its supernatural origin?  (35-36)

56. What does “self-authenticating” mean in reference to the Bible?  (36)

6A. **How was the written word of God communicated to us?**  (37-54)

57. What are the six steps in the word of God being communicated to us?  (37)

58. What is the difference between “natural revelation” and “special revelation?” (37)

59. What are some of the ways God has revealed himself to man?  (38)

60. How common was special revelation in Bible times?  (38)

61. Define verbal-plenary inspiration.  (38-41)

62. Briefly summarize both the logical and the biblical support for verbal-plenary inspiration.  (38-41)

63. How does inspiration relate to copies of the biblical text?  (41-42)

64. Briefly summarize the formation of both the Old and New Testament canons (i.e., how they came to be received as the word of God).  (42-46)

65. Which church council made the sixty-six books of our Bible the word of God? Explain your answer.  (42-46)

66. How do we explain the fact that some of the early Church leaders (e.g., Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, etc.) quoted from the Old Testament apocrypha as if it were a part of the Old Testament?  (44)

67. What branch of biblical studies seeks to recover the original wording of the biblical texts?  (46-47)

68. Briefly address the reliability of the present-day Hebrew text (Old Testament).  (48)

69. Briefly address the reliability of the present-day Greek text (New Testament).  (48)

70. Briefly describe the problem of translating the Hebrew and Greek texts into English.  (51-52)
7A. The modern rejection of the Bible: Radical criticism  (55-60)

71. Briefly describe the documentary hypothesis. Tell what it's about, you don't need to go into details.)  (55-60)

72. What are some of the incorrect historical assumptions that the documentary hypothesis is built upon?  (57-59)

8A. How do we deal with alleged Bible discrepancies?  (61-62)

73. What are four areas in which discrepancies (or alleged discrepancies) in the Bible show up?  (61-62)