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The Faith Once Delivered

The Bible exhorts Christians to "contend for the faith once delivered to the saints".

What was that faith? When was it delivered? Who delivered it?

by James McBride

Do you agree with some Christians that the teachings expressed by the founder of their Church are unchangeable? The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ("Mormons"), for example, faced this challenge many years ago. So too did the Seventh Day Adventist church. And the Jehovah's Witnesses. Right now, indeed, the Church of England is torn by a similar challenge. And even within the Roman Church there are still rumblings from the changes instigated by Vatican II!

However, simple analysis surely dispels this notion.

Why, for example, so many denominations? Were all these leaders "inspired" in widely different - and conflicting - doctrinal directions by the same Holy Spirit of truth? And if they claim inspiration *why do they sometimes admit error* - evidenced by a doctrinal change? Isn't it just possible, therefore, that the "great teacher" simply got it wrong - or only partially right? Was he (or she) infallible? He may have claimed divine inspiration. But could his view perhaps be colored by background, by prejudice, by limited scholarship or simple lack of access to all the facts? Could he even have *deliberately set out to deceive*?

Few Christians would quarrel with Jude's exhortation to "carry on a vigorous defense of the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's people" (Jude 3, Williams trans). It's surely a praiseworthy goal to which all of us should aspire. But we must be quite clear what it means!

We are exhorted in Scripture to "grow in knowledge". Doesn't this imply that we may have *imperfect knowledge* of "truth"? That perhaps truth garnered in one generation can be buried through persecution, martyrdom, deception - and lost to the next generation? And later be rediscovered?

No church can remain as some kind of doctrinal fossil!

In fact, my original questions as to *what* was that faith, *when* was it delivered, and *who* delivered are at the heart of the matter. Let's consider them.

Who Is Right?

What specific "doctrines" the Bible teaches is largely irrelevant in this study. [An outline is available in our *Statement of Beliefs*] The central fact is: there is a single, specific body of belief, of teaching (doctrine), that is original Christianity. A study of the twentieth century's some two thousand plus Christian denominations might appear to give the lie to this! Can the Holy Spirit be guiding both Pope John Paul *and* his implacable foe Dr Ian Paisley? The Church of England *and* the Brethren Church *and* the Mormons *and* the Jehovah's Witnesses - and *The Churches of God*? And guiding them into different and opposing teachings?

Do the Scriptures - which are "given by inspiration of God" (II Tim 3:16) - teach one group to baptize infants, and another to immerse only adults? Or one to insist on salvation by faith alone while another demands "works" also? One to venerate images or the crucifix, another to abhor them? One to speak in tongues, another to regard this as demonic? One to celebrate the Mass and another to consider it pagan?

Notice these examples are of *mainstream* christianity. Include other groups claiming to be christian and we could also contrast those who observe Sunday with those who consider the *seventh* day as the Sabbath (many millions of Christians, in fact!), those who keep Christmas and Easter with those who consider these festivals pagan, Trinitarians with non-trinitarians, the immortal soul concept with "soul sleep" - almost *ad infinitum*!

With such variation - who is right? Is anyone? And if *all* represent "the truth" (and do any proudly proclaim

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themselves to be *teaching error*?) where does that place the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit perhaps confused? Clearly not. There is only one expression of the truth, of the mind of God. Wrote the apostle Paul, "There is ... one Spirit, one faith..." (Eph 4:5).

The challenge, surely, is for the church of God to extract the nuggets of truth from the Scriptures! *That* is where truth lies. Not from added traditions, not from the ravings of some prophet or prophetess. not from long-hidden plates dug from a mountain-side, nor from hoary traditions of "the Fathers".

Sanity and stability can return only when we recognize that we dare not add to - nor detract from - the Word of God as expressed in the Old and New Testaments! *There* lies "the faith once delivered"!

The Holy Scriptures

First, let's look at the writings of our "Old Testament".

Few Christians would challenge the idea that these writings represent the foundation of New Testament teachings. For example, there are in the New Testament (NT) over six hundred direct quotations and references to the Old Testament (OT). And there's little teaching in the NT that is not securely rooted in the "Holy Scriptures" - that is, the thirty-nine books into which modern versions of the OT are divided. Even such an "advanced" and Christian teaching as "love your neighbour as yourself" found expression by the pen of Moses - Lev 19:18 - some fifteen hundred years before Jesus quoted it!

Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote to his "pupil" Timothy that these same Holy Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) are "inspired by God, and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in doing what is right" (II Tim 3:16). The first Christians initially had no other writings from which to learn the truth! At Thessalonica they were commended by Paul for "carrying on a daily study of the Scriptures [i.e., the Old Testament]" to see if Paul's message were true (Acts 17:11). This is hardly the view of most twentieth century Christians!

Jesus himself identified these Scriptures as "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44-45). In the language of those times, he thus described the entirety of what Protestants today call "The Old Testament" and which the Jews term "The Holy Scriptures".

The Old Testament, then, is certainly a reliable source for discovering "the faith once delivered to the saints". Without it the writings of the New Testament would be largely gobbledygook - incomprehensible! Yet most Christians all but ignore it, relegate it to history's dust-bin.

Inspired New Testament

The primitive Church of God relied on the Old Testament writings, but supplemented by the words through letters and sermons - of the apostles and prophets. At that time God was directly inspiring these men to lay the foundation of Christianity. Wrote Paul to the Ephesian Christians: "...for you are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone" (ch 2:20). Indeed Paul claims that the words he spoke were "in words taught by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 2:13).

All this was, of course, predicted by Jesus himself.

In his final counsel to the disciples prior to his death, Jesus told them: "...when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into the whole truth" (John 16:13). He also told them, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (14:26). This enabled them to preach and teach - and later to have written down - the whole counsel of God. They were inspired to perfectly recall all Jesus taught them during their three and a half years in his company before his death. And also that burning instruction he imparted to them in the nearly six weeks following his resurrection (Lu 24:32, Acts 1:3). Indeed throughout their lives the Holy Spirit guided them into all truth.

It was therefore to these men and by these means and at that time that the entire structure of Christian belief was laid! Paul urged the young evangelist Timothy to entrust to reliable men *the same teachings* Paul had imparted (II Tim 2:2). There was no room for variety of belief in the fundamentals of the faith!

Do you want to know what Jesus taught? Look to these Scriptures! Ought you to accept a "new" teaching? Only if it is perfectly in harmony with the writings of the Old and New Testaments! And should you abandon a traditional teaching or doctrine of your Church? Only when the change is clearly proven *without shadow of doubt* from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

No Infallible Teachers

In our day we need both the Old Testament *and* the New Testament.

For there are no living witnesses to the life and words of Jesus. Not since the death of the apostle John at the end of the first Christian century have there been living apostles whose words are directly inspired by God. The leaders of the churches of God are "inspired" in their words and teachings only as they reflect the written Word of God - though God gives His Church insights in regard to the

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application of His Word for our times. There are, today, *no infallible teachers!* Sadly, though, there are many who assume such a role. And many thousands who willingly and guilably are deceived by their claims!

Too often Christians will flit to a new but powerfully presented doctrine without thorough examination of the Bible texts! Paul urged: "Prove all things. Hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:21). Elsewhere he says: "For a time is coming when men will not tolerate wholesome instruction, but, wanting to have their ears tickled, they will find a multitude of teachers to satisfy their own fancies, and will close their ears to the truth and will turn away to fables" (1 Timothy 4:3). Quite an indictment!

Could You Believe A Lie?

The apostle Paul gave a solemn warning that's of special application today. Writing to the church at Thessalonica about the crisis at the close of this age - our day - he warned of a coming time of worldwide deception perpetrated by a "lawless man". This wretched being "is produced by the spirit of evil and armed with all the force, wonders and signs that falsehood can devise. To those involved in this dying world he will come with evil's undiluted power to deceive, *for they have refused to love the truth* which could have saved them" (II Thes 2:9-10).

I need but remind you that Jesus said "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17)!

If we fail to measure our beliefs against the yardstick of the divinely inspired *Word of the Living God* then we could be in deep trouble. For the apostle Paul went on to tell the Thessalonian Christians that for those who *don't* love the truth "God sends upon them, therefore, the full force of evil's delusion so that they put their faith in an utter fraud"!

A fearful warning indeed. Failure to love God's Word leads to a fatal creeping spiritual dementia in which we end up believing downright lies.

Do you "love the truth"? Are you willing to compare your beliefs with the inspired Word of God? When you hear "new doctrine" - from whatever source - are you, like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), eager to "search the Scriptures [for the Bereans this meant the *Old Testament!*] to see if these things were so"? Or do you simply accept your church's teachings without question?

In the Scriptures God has given us all we need to know about himself, about the way of salvation, about how we ought to behave. Admittedly there are areas where the fine details are cause for legitimate debate. But the broad brushstrokes of vital truth are clear for all who have the

spiritual eye to see. It is there for us to prove - *personally!*

Yet virtually the whole of Christianity feeds off traditional teachings that are pure pagan belief gift-wrapped in Christian clothing. Both Old and New Testament are relegated to the dustbin!

Where do *you* get your beliefs? How do they compare with the Scriptures? Are you certain your view of Christian doctrine isn't just a veneer of Bible-sounding words that hide ancient lies? Let *all* of us who claim to be Christ's fine tune our love for the truth, and earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the church in the Holy Scriptures!

And if you are not yet committed to Jesus Christ and to his teachings, you are invited to investigate further. True faith is built on the foundation of sound Bible knowledge. Without this knowledge you could "believe" - but be deceived. Just like "the demons" (James 2:19)!

The Churches of God publish a range of titles (on tape and in booklets) which highlight the core teachings of Scripture - as free from faulty human tradition as we know how!

Write now for our list of *free publications*. And also request a copy of our *Statement of Beliefs*.

The BIBLE: some evaluations of its worth

H G Wells: "...the [Bible] is the Book that has held together the fabric of western civilization...it has unified and kept together great masses of people...it is the handbook of life to countless millions of men and women, it has explained the world to the mass of our people and has given them moral standards and a form into which their consciences could work"

Matthew Arnold: "...you will find one English book and one only where...perfect plainness of speech is allied with perfect nobleness; and that book is the Bible" [*On Translating Homer*]

Ronald Regan: "I never had any doubt about [the Bible] being of divine origin...point out to me any similar collection of writings that has lasted for as many thousands of years and is still a best-seller worldwide"

Woodrow Wilson: "When you have read the Bible you will know it is the Word of God, because you will have found it the key to your own heart, your own happiness and your own duty"

Daniel Webster: "If we abide by the principles taught by the Bible, our country will go on prospering"

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Theodore Roosevelt: “A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education”

Thomas H Huxley: “The Bible has been the Magna Charta of the poor and the oppressed”

Samuel T Coleridge: “For more than a thousand years the Bible collectively taken has gone hand in hand with civilization, science, law - in short, with the moral and intellectual cultivation of the species; always supporting and often leading the way”

Patrick Henry: “There is a book [i.e. the Bible] worth all other books which were ever printed”

Can you trust the Bible text? ...some expert opinion

“...the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established” [**Sir Frederic Kenyon:** *Handbook To the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*]

“It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the NT, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers in the church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world”. [**Kenyon:** *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*]

“It is true (and it cannot be too emphatically stated) that none of the fundamental truths of Christianity rests on passages of which the genuineness is doubtful”. [**Kenyon:** *ibid*]

“There are 200,000 variants in 20,000 MSS which are confined to 10,000 places and of which only 400 affect meaning - only 50 of significance. In not one of these [50] is a single article of faith or practice which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching” [**Philip Schaff:** *Companion To the Greek New Testament*]

The Dead Sea Scrolls: Discovered in 1947 in a cave, there are some 40,000 fragments of 500 scrolls pre-dating known MSS by a thousand years

- in one chapter of Isaiah: only one word differed from later MSS

- Book of *Kings*: not one consonant differed. The odds for this are 1:750,000,000,000!

In contrast, there are only 643 MSS of *Homer's Iliad*. Yet these have twenty times the number of instances where the original words are in doubt.

There are only 10 MSS of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and 20 copies of Livy's *Roman History*. *Tacitus* has 2 MSS extant. All are about a thousand years younger than the Bible MSS.

Eusebius (b.263) quotes Papias, friend of the apostle John: “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that [Peter] remembered, whether sayings or doings of Christ... So Mark made no mistake, writing down in this way some things as [Peter] mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, nor to include any false statement among them” [*Ecclesiastical History*]

Irenaeus (C. 180, student of Polycarp) confirms the apostolic origins of the Gospels [*Against Heretics III*]

Sir William Ramsay (d. 1939, originally a skeptic) “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense... in short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians” [*The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*]

Nelson Glueck (Jewish archaeologist): “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference” [*Rivers in the Desert*]

Peter James: “...Egyptian chronology may be wrong by some 250 years and that a completely new picture of Biblical archaeology can be developed which at last restores harmony between the historical and stratigraphical records”. [*Centuries of Darkness 1991*]

F F Bruce: “...if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond doubt” [*New Testament Documents* p.15]

F F Bruce: “...the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original [NT] wording...is in truth remarkably small” [*New Testament Documents*, p.19]

F F Bruce: “The NT was complete or substantially complete about 100AD, the majority of the writings being in existence twenty to forty years before this”. [*New Testament Documents* p.12]

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F F Bruce: “One thing must be emphatically stated. The NT did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired” [*New Testament Documents*, p.27]

...and in contrast:

Book of Mormon: Over four thousand changes have been made to the original text since it was first published in 1830. Yet its author, Joseph Smith, then claimed it as “the most correct of any book on earth”, and “holy scripture comparable to the Bible” (see the Introduction to the “*Book of Mormon*”).

These changes were made to reflect substantial doctrinal changes.

It states: “Because that I [*ie* God] have spoken one word ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another....because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written...” and refers to “the books which shall be written” (2 *Nephi* 29).

The Bible, however, speaks of the faith *once delivered to the saints!*

PROPHECY

There are some 300 OT prophecies of the Messiah.

Dr Peter W Stoner.. calculates that the chance of Jesus fulfilling just 48 of these 300 prophecies as 1 in 10 to the power 157.

If you were to count at 250/min it would take 190 million years to count a line of electrons one inch long. A cubic inch would take 190m x 190m x 190m years to count.

Stoner says that if we took one electron, marked it and stirred it into that one cubic inch, then ask a blind person to find it - his chance of success would be the same as any one man fulfilling even 48 of the 300 *OT* Messianic prophecies!

The fact of Jesus' Messiahship Is “proved perhaps more absolutely than any other fact in the world” he says [*Science Speaks*, 1958].

And surely the reverse is true. That all these prophecies were so perfectly fulfilled must substantiate the divine origin of the original prophecies. *Read Isaiah 46:8-11!*

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