

Taking the Bible Seriously

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[0 : 00] In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary selected post-truth as its word of the year, as it does every year.

It selects a word that sort of captures Western civilisation's vibe at that time. So post-truth was 2016.

And it defines post-truth as an adjective relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs. It's a word that dates back to 1992, but its usage exploded by 2000% in 2016.

Sorry, 2016. In 2016. Why? The US presidential election, which saw Donald Trump elected as president.

[1 : 06] An election campaign marked by so many competing and false claims, allegations of fraud and proven mistruths.

Voices across the political spectrum were quick to condemn the opposition with little or no facts and quick to defend their stance regardless of facts.

Fake news allowed agendas to advance regardless of and often contrary to the actual facts, the truth. It's hard to think of a better word suited to the spirit of our age than that of post-truth.

Post-truth has now blossomed into a culture of confusion. In a post-truth world, answers to life's big questions no longer need to correspond to reality at all.

They only need to cater to whatever we personally desire. The question is, as a society, are we better off?

[2 : 18] You see, confusion only gives birth to more questions. That's the nature of confusion. And more questions only builds anxiety and uncertainty.

So we need answers, not just questions. And so the title of this series that we're currently in, Your Word, is Truth.

Now, I understand that we exist in a culture that many people would think that the Bible fits in that category of fake news.

It was written thousands of years ago over a long period of time. And it makes some incredible, in fact, startling claims. It claims that there is a God who made the universe.

It claims that this God sent his son into the world to die on a cross for humanity. It claims that Jesus, the son of God, performed miracles, that he was raised from the dead, and he is now present with his followers by the Holy Spirit through his word right now.

[3 : 29] It claims that he will come back to this earth one day as the universal judge and king, wind up history, right every wrong that has ever happened, and with his people exist forever in eternal bliss.

They're extraordinary claims. Extraordinary claims. And we need some pretty serious evidence to believe them. And yet, on the other hand, billions of people over time have believed these claims, including some of the smartest people in our world to this day.

And, in fact, smartest people throughout history. They have believed the claims, and from all different cultures, have believed the claims of the Bible are true, and that they are authoritative over their lives.

And so today, if you've got the St. Paul's app in front of you, I encourage you to open it up, open up your Bibles. We've got really three points here to kind of, each point's got, well, the first two have got three sub-points, but to build on last week's assertion that the Bible is true, and it is reliable for everything in life and faith.

And the three points are, it's historically reliable, culturally reliable, and it's personally reliable. So, first of all, historically reliable. One of the common accusations today is that the Bible, and

particularly the New Testament accounts about Jesus, are written by, if you like, the winners in history.

[5 : 16] And therefore, because it's written by the winners in history, no one can really know the original Jesus, what he was really like. In fact, the claim is that the claims about his miracles and the fact that he was divine and that he rose again were all written much later in history by church leaders in order to try and get Christianity to spread.

In other words, it's an attempt for them to build their power base. There are, in fact, multiple reasons why those particular modern accusations are simply not right and, in fact, unfair.

But I want to just give you three, very briefly, three reasons why you can trust the Bible historically about what it says about Jesus. Firstly, the New Testament accounts about Jesus are written way too early for them to be legends.

Take the beginning of Luke that Anne just read out for us. Luke has written a biography about Jesus and he points out to his readers in verses 2 and 3, many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses.

I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. I too decided to write an orderly account for you. Now, Luke is writing 30 to 40 years after Jesus and he makes the point that lots of people who were eyewitnesses of Jesus post his resurrection are still alive and you can check the facts with them.

[7 : 21] Now, writing even closer than Luke, closer to the events of Jesus' life was the Apostle Paul.

He wrote letters only 15 to 20 years after the events of Jesus' life and he says this in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 6 about the resurrection of Jesus. He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living.

Paul could not have possibly written a public document promoting Christianity and make a statement like that unless it was, in fact, provable by other eyewitnesses apart from himself. Or in Philippians chapter 2, Paul quotes a hymn of Jesus' divinity and if Philippians is written so close, in fact, potentially his very first letter that he wrote, so close to the events of Jesus' life and Paul is quoting in Philippians something that Christians have been declaring from outside of Philippians, right from the very early days as the gathering of the early church, Christians have been worshipping Jesus as God himself from the very beginning.

Not hundreds of years later, from the very beginning, they saw him as divine. The documents of the New Testament are way too early for people just simply to say that they just said whatever they wanted about Jesus while thousands of people witnessed him in person were still alive.

[9 : 12] You just simply cannot do that historically. Secondly, the documents of the New Testament are too counterproductive to be legends.

Remember that the accusation here is the Bible is what the early church leaders wanted people to believe in order to build their own power base and spread Christianity. So imagine you're one of those church leaders living, you know, 70, 80, 100, 300 years afterwards and you make up stories about Jesus so that people will believe your stories about Jesus.

Would you put in those stories when you're trying to convince people that Jesus is divine son of God, saviour of the whole world, a person of perfection, would you put in there stories of Jesus, for instance, in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking his father if there's any other way, take, I don't want this plan, come up with another plan.

Sweating tears of blood. Would you put in there Jesus on the cross crying out to God, why have you forsaken me? Those accounts make look, Jesus make look like he's, he wants a different way. He wants something, some other option. Makes him look weak. Would you include in your first century stories that all of the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women?

[10 : 47] You know, I know this is Mother's Day, so bear with me on this one. This was a time when women's evidence was not admissible in court because of their low social status.

And so on today, we want to give thanks to the New Testament documents and early Christianity that changed that. Does not oppress women at all.

all the gospel accounts say that the original eyewitnesses were women? And not only that, but when you get into the New Testament, you see that the apostles themselves are far from glowing figures.

They're cowardly, they're slow to believe, they're self-interest. Why would you include any of that if you're making it up? These stories are totally counterproductive for consolidating power for the early leaders of the Christian movement.

Thirdly, they're also too detailed to be legends. Ancient myths and novels were never written like this. Never written like this.

[12:01] That is the current form that we have with novels today, I think, for instance, the Da Vinci Code, where it mixes a little bit of history, historical facts, with a completely a bunch of legends in there to make people think that it's written as history.

That is a very modern phenomenon in terms of a writing style. Ancient legends were never written in that way.

The New Testament doctrines of Jesus don't have the forms of legend. They are written too early to be legends and they are too counterproductive to be legends.

You need to be able to trust them. You go, hang on a bit, Steve, you haven't seen anything about the Old Testament. I haven't got time to go into that detail. There are plenty of books written about that as well in terms of the reliability of the Old Testament.

But briefly, let me just say, if you can trust what the New Testament says about Jesus, you can trust what Jesus says about the Old Testament. And Jesus saw the Old Testament as authoritative.

[13:15] And it was true. He quoted virtually every book of the Old Testament and called them the Scriptures, God's Word.

Secondly, my second point is that we can trust the Bible culturally. Now, I think it's true to say that modern people care less about historical reliability of the Bible because they're more troubled by the cultural aspects of the Bible.

That's more of a problem for the modern person. They consider the Bible offensive, primitive, backward, in its views. The Bible offends Sydney-siders in multiple ways.

Multiple ways. And it's a long list of ways that's constantly moving and changing. So here's three considerations of any bit of the Bible that might offend you.

Three considerations. Firstly, consider the possibility that it isn't teaching what you think it's teaching. when you read it. For instance, I could never understand why some of the great spiritual heroes of the Old Testament had so many wives.

[14:33] When I first read it, and I see in the New Testament, you know, the leaders of God's church must have been a husband of one wife. And it's like, polygamy didn't seem to be a New Testament thing, but was in the Old Testament thing.

And I could never understand why that was the case. Until I realized that the Bible was not in any way endorsing it. It was actually, when you read the accounts in the Old Testament, the Bible is actually subverting it.

In every case where polygamy is practiced, it goes bad. And the Bible records it going bad. There's never a case of polygamy in the Old Testament where it, and they lived happily ever after, husband with 700 wives.

Never do you see that in the Old Testament. Families break down, lives are ruined, physically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally. The Bible shows us consistently how bad it is, even as it records it.

That is, the Bible wasn't endorsing something that I thought it was endorsing. It wasn't teaching something that I thought it was teaching. Secondly, please consider the possibility that you are misunderstanding what the Bible teaches because of your own cultural blind spots and personal preferences.

[16:01] Luke 24, verses 20 and 21. Anne just read that out to us on the road to Emmaus. Sorry, it's the account of the road to Emmaus. Anne wasn't there. We see these early disciples had misunderstood the prophecies about the Messiah, the Old Testament Messiah.

As Jews, their blind spots were they were only thinking about the redemption of Israel, not the whole world.

They had a cultural blind spot that meant that they in fact misread scripture and couldn't therefore understand Jesus. And the modern person does the same thing on so many ways.

So many ways. That long list of offensive to Sidneysiders. Let me just raise one. Slavery. One accusation is that the Bible condones slavery when we clearly know as modern people that it's wrong.

wrong. And therefore, if it's wrong on this issue, then how can we trust the Bible on any moral and ethic issue? It just needs to update itself.

[17 : 20] So the question is, does the Bible actually condone slavery? Now there are parts of the New Testament when Paul tells slaves to obey their masters and we go, ah, there we go, there it is, right there.

In the New Testament letter of Philemon, Paul is addressing a relationship between a master and his servant.

And as Paul unpacks this relationship, it is clear that it's not the same kind of relationship that we would call slavery. slavery. When we read the word slave in our cultural context, we automatically turn our minds back to the 17th, 18th and 19th century and modern slavery.

Race-based, ethnic minority slavery. slavery. And we import our cultural blind spot into every time we read the word slavery.

When we read the Bible with those cultural blinders on, we are misunderstanding what the Bible is teaching. In the Greco-Roman world, slaves were not distinguishable from everyone else by race or by the way that they spoke or by the clothing that they wore.

[18 : 44] They looked and lived like everyone else and were not segregated off as part of society. Slaves were often quite educated and even more highly educated than their masters and therefore they held high positions.

Therefore you see that in Luke 16. High managerial positions. Slaves also made the same wages as free labourers and therefore over time they were able to save themselves, save the money up and to buy themselves out of slavery.

The average slave worked for a master in the first century for less than 10 years. It was not a lifelong oppressive relationship.

It was the purpose of paying back debts. So as soon as we get our modern mindset of slavery and impose it on the Bible, we have completely misunderstood scripture and what it's actually teaching in that moment.

So and I want to add those who historically have to use the Bible to defend the practice of kidnapping and enslaving people such as in the slave trade of the modern era, they have read the Bible through their own cultural blind spots as well and they are wrong.

[20 : 16] In the same way we are wrong if we read the Bible through our own cultural blind spots now. Thirdly, consider the possibility that you are being offended by the Bible because of an assumption that your cultural moment is in fact superior to all others.

This is offence because I am superior. Often that assumption has never been tested and it's actually never been personally acknowledged.

The reason we are offended by some biblical passages is because it is culturally offensive in my own cultural moment. But in other cultures in this moment and in other cultures from the past, they have no problem with the exact same text.

On the other hand, the passage we think is fine today, we're happy with, they have a problem in their culture right now with those texts and in the past.

You see, in our progressive individualistic Western society, what the Bible says about sex is like such a problem. But what it says about forgiveness, that's pretty good.

[21 : 51] Love each other. Go to the Middle East today and what the Bible says about sex is pretty good, probably not strict enough but pretty good.

What it says about forgiveness, that's a problem. That's a problem in a shame and honour culture and particularly a shame culture. That's a problem.

If we are offended by something in the Bible, I'd want to ask, why should your cultural sensibilities trump everyone else's? it's a little bit arrogant?

Could even say it's a little bit racist. Why get rid of the Bible because it offends my culture at certain points?

After all, for the liberal progressives amongst us, the young ones who sit over the authority of the Bible, the old ones who sit over the authority of the Bible in this moment, just a little bit of a tip.

[23 : 02] Your grandchildren and great grandchildren are going to find a lot of what you think today is very embarrassing. They're going to think exactly the same of you.

Your cultural progressiveness is going to be seen as conservative and traditional. in about 50 years. Of course, you don't know which bits, but it will be true.

Don't miss out on all the Bible and the Christian faith has to offer just because you won't let go of some cultural truth that in 50 years will be considered a joke.

If the Bible really is God revealing himself to creation and it's not the product of any specific culture as I have said multiple times over the last five to ten years, wouldn't it therefore contradict every culture at some point and even have to offend every culture at some point?

So if you read it and find some things beautiful and other things offensive, then it's probably true and from God.

[24 : 30] Lastly, it's personally reliable. A completely authoritative Bible is the prerequisite for a warm personal relationship with God.

It is not the enemy of a warm personal relationship with God. As I said last week, in fact, you cannot have a relationship with God without his word. It's like for you who are Christian and you are not regularly in your word, it's like a wedding day where you make promises and don't communicate with your spouse from then on in.

have a look at Luke 24 32 where the disciples reflect back on their journey along the road to Emmaus.

Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us? In the Bible, the heart is the centre of the whole person.

It's not just the seat of the emotions. Hearts burning here in Luke 24 means a full life-changing personal encounter with God.

[25 : 49] And they experienced something here in this moment that they have never experienced before. And when did they experience it? When he opened the scriptures to us.

when the Bible, its meaning was properly open to them, when they understood what it meant, that is the way into this deep relationship.

And notice how it happens. Verses 20-21, they say Jesus died, but we had hoped that he would be the one who would save us. And Jesus calls them out for being foolish and slow to believe the Bible.

way to win friends and influence people. Why did they misunderstand? Verse 27, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, in other words, Old Testament, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

He is saying that every single thing in the Bible is about him. Too many people have walked away from the Christian faith and the Bible because they have misunderstood that central point in verse 27.

[27 : 10] It's all about Jesus. If we think the Bible is somehow about us and what we must do and how we must live, then we don't need it as a saviour who will die for us.

all we need is simple rules and a code of conduct and therefore in the modern times it is regressive. There are only two ways to read the Bible. Read it as if it was all about us and what we must do or we can read every part of it as if it is about him.

It is about Jesus and what he has done. And if you're in a community group right now, you're working through that process of understanding how the whole Bible is connected to Jesus.

If you're not in a community group, jump into that space and have your eyes opened. The whole Bible points to Jesus and explains Jesus and everything is achieved for us in dying in our place for our sin.

[28 : 24] The exodus from slavery in Egypt, where Jesus started with these guys on the road to Emmaus, the sacrificial lamb and the passing over of God's judgment is all about Jesus.

When the Bible is all about Jesus and what he's achieved for us out of his love for us, that's when the Bible gets personal. That's when it becomes an encounter with him, a deep relationship with him.

And so my conviction from both experience and the teaching of the Bible itself is that the most effective means for bolstering confidence in the Bible is not so much what I'm doing right now and did last week, building arguments about the authority and the truthfulness of the Bible, but in fact to spend time in the Bible, reading the Bible with Jesus at the centre.

Put it like this, I could tell you right now that honey is a substance made from several bee species. Bees produce honey by gathering and then refining the sugary secretments of plants or secretments of other insects.

[29 : 49] this refinement takes place within the individual bees through regurgitation and enzymic activity. And honey is sweet because of its high concentrations of simple sugars like fructose and glucose.

In fact, it has the same relative sweetness as white sugar. One standard teaspoon of honey provides over 190 kilojoules of food energy.

It is a remarkable, remarkable sweet bit of food. And I could tell you that. It's all true, but the best thing I could do for you is not tell you about the sweetness of honey, honey, but to get some and to put it on a spoon and taste it.

And of course, then do something with your insulin pump. I'll do that in a moment.

Make some adjustments for that. In other words, if you don't get it then, I could sit here and do a lecture about the sweetness of honey, and you can walk away with a bunch of facts.

[31 : 21] Reliable facts. But what you need to do to really get the facts, you need to stick it on a spoon, you need to taste it.

Taste that it is, in fact, good. And if at that point, that is, you don't get it until you taste it, and if you don't get it once you've tasted it, there's nothing more I can do for you.

there's nothing more I can do for you. And so, as King David invited others to join him in Psalm 34, verse 8, so I invite you to taste and see that the Lord is good.

God promises to bless the reading and teaching of his word. The word of God itself is more than enough to accomplish the work of God in the people of God.

God and there is no better way to understand and come to embrace the truth and the authority and the goodness and the rightness of scripture than in fact to open it up and let it out in your life.

[32 : 34] And as you do, as you do, pray, Lord, help me to taste and see that you are good.

Amen.