

Tonight I want to encourage you with a piece of apologetics, the defense of the faith. I want to remind you in one specific way, how strong the case actually is for the historical reality of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. I want to encourage you by reminding you that your convictions as Christians are well grounded, better grounded even than you might think!

Of the making of books there is no end! Even in the digital age books come off the press in astonishing numbers. The world leader in 2006, the last year for which numbers are available, was the United Kingdom with 206,000 titles published. In the United States in the same year 172,000 titles were published and in China 100,951. Now books, as you know, are of many different types. A novel is not the same thing at all as a textbook; an almanac is very different from an autobiography or a children's story. Some books are popular and others are technical and intended for a small and well-defined readership. A Harry Potter book sells in the millions; a philosophy or science treatise may well be read only by some hundreds or a few thousands at the most. Some try to be both but usually fail. Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* was bought by a million and read by a thousand! But, the latter type of book – the more technical, scholarly, and academic book – may be much more influential in the long run. Some of the most influential books in modern world history have been the furthest thing from page-turners. Think of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*. Those were books that changed the world for untold millions of people; indeed for everyone to some extent and yet comparatively very few people ever read them.

And the same may be said of some books about the Bible and the Christian faith. Surely some very influential books have been written for a wider audience and have been read by millions. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and, in our day, C.S. Lewis's books and those of Francis Schaeffer come to mind. But some of the most influential have been academic or scholarly in type. These books influenced the thinking of theological or biblical scholars who, in turn, influenced the thinking of pastors and preachers through whom the thinking of the wider church was changed. Sometime the influence was sinister, as in the case of Julius Wellhausen's *The History of Israel*, published in German in 1883 and in English two years later, which described the evolution of Israelite religion as a natural progression from primitive totemism to sophisticated ethical monotheism and along the way cut up the writings of the Old Testament into a patchwork of sources and stood its literary history on its head, placing the later books first in date of writing (such as the prophets) and the early books (such as the Pentateuch) last. We are still recovering from the damage done in Christian scholarship by Wellhausen's skeptical reconstruction of the history and theology of the Old Testament. Sometimes the influence of a highly scholarly book was much more positive, such as J.B. Lightfoot's seminal work, *The Apostolic Fathers* (the first volume of which was published in 1890). That book demonstrated the early date of the writings of the group of early Christian writers known as the apostolic fathers. The significance of that was the demonstration of the still earlier date of the books of the New Testament cited by them. Obviously if the writings of the apostolic fathers – Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and so on – come from the last years of the first century and the early years of the second century, then the New Testament writings that they cite must be dated still earlier. Lightfoot's exact scholarship put paid to the ridiculous idea of so much 19th century German biblical scholarship that many of the books of the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular,

were not written until the middle of the 2nd century, fully a century or more after the events they purport to describe and, accordingly were worthless as reliable histories. Hardly anyone doubts anymore that a substantial part of the New Testament was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and many admit this of at least some of the Gospels; in other words, these books were written within the lifetime of the principal characters of the Gospel history itself.

Well, all of that to say that there is a new book that I hope will prove to be another such seminal study and have a similarly far-reaching influence. It is also a scholarly, highly academic work. It was written by Richard Bauckham, a British professor of New Testament Studies at St. Andrews University and is entitled *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. My son-in-law, Joshua Moon, took a graduate seminar with Prof. Bauckham on the subject of the book and was heartened by the fact that the unwillingness on the part of a number in the seminar to accept his conclusions was powerless to stand up to the argument of the book. It is a long book, some 508 pages of text and, as I said, in some respects, like many scholarly books, it is somewhat tedious. It tills the ground until no clod is left. But it is, in truth, an electrifying book and, whether or not it will – facts often have very little to do with what people, including scholars, believe – it holds promise of forcing the claims of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith powerfully once again upon the world.

As you may know, for a long time now, in more liberal New Testament scholarship it has been assumed that there is a real break between “what actually happened” in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the account of that life and ministry written down in the Gospels. The believing church through these 2000 years has trusted the Gospels to give us the real Jesus – miracles, resurrection, ascension, and all – but many others have not had the same confidence in the Gospel history. They regard Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as shaped beyond historical recognition by the church’s developing faith in Jesus. What Christians came to believe about Jesus in the years that followed his life and ministry was read back into the story by the Gospel writers. The church came to believe that he was the Messiah and the Son of God and so the story was rewritten to support those claims. The church came to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and so the resurrection account was shaped accordingly. These scholars, skeptical of the historical trustworthiness of the written Gospels, then set out to search for the real, historical Jesus *behind* the Gospels. And because that search was so speculative – after all, we have almost no other account of Jesus but that of the Gospels themselves – the Jesus that emerged as their so-called “historical Jesus” was more a reflection of the views of the particular scholar than any real figure of history. The evidence of that was that every scholar came up with his own real Jesus: the Galilean peasant, the political revolutionary, the ethical teacher, the rabid egomaniac, the prophet of the end-of-the world, and so on.

Professor Bauckham’s theory, certainly not original, but backed up by impressive scholarship, some of which is quite new, is that the Gospels are in fact *testimony* – that is the kind of history they are – and they ask to be trusted *on that ground*, because the information contained in them is the testimony of people who were eyewitnesses of the events they describe. He reminds us that in all historical study testimony is a uniquely valuable means of access to historical reliability. Even such modern events as the holocaust are known to us in largest part from testimony. We

have access to the historical reality because of eyewitness testimony, because of the information imparted by participants and observers.

Modern liberal biblical scholarship, for more than a century now, has supposed – largely without proof – that there existed a long period of oral tradition between the events themselves and their record in the four Gospels. The stories about Jesus were told and retold as a kind of folklore and, as stories will be, were changed along the way. People's own ideas, beliefs, prejudices, and longings shaped and reshaped the stories as they were handed from mouth to mouth until they were finally written down by people whose lives were quite remote from the events themselves. In this understanding the eyewitnesses got the process moving but had little to do with how the story was eventually written. But Prof. Bauckham asks: "*Where did the eyewitnesses go in the years that separated the life of Jesus from the written Gospels?*" And in answer to that question he points out several things:

1. The time between the events themselves and the writing of the Gospels is quite short, no more than a generation, easily bridged by a single lifetime;
2. the theories of skeptical scholarship require the tradition about Jesus to pass through many minds and many mouths before it was written down in the Gospels (otherwise how could the story change so much), but the eyewitnesses were still alive to check and correct creative additions to the accounts;
3. in its formative period the church was quite small and was located in a relatively small area making it still harder for changes or innovations to be added to the original accounts;
4. and the mobility of some if not many of the church's eyewitnesses meant that there would have been a great deal of personal contact between the eyewitnesses themselves and the Christian congregations as well as the writers of the New Testament books who were not eyewitnesses themselves (such as Luke). In other words, the eyewitness testimony was widely known and people would have known if the record were deviating from that testimony.

And then the bombshell conclusion: the evidence indicates, and rather conclusively, that the eyewitnesses of Jesus life and work remained authoritative sources of the written Gospels and that eyewitness testimony, *not oral tradition*, remained the basis of the Gospel history not only through the time of the writing of the Gospels but even afterward. The Gospels were, in fact, *oral histories*, taken down by the Gospel writers directly from the mouths of those who were eyewitnesses, if they were not eyewitnesses themselves, as was Matthew, for example, or John. Interestingly, oral histories are very popular in history writing nowadays. You got a lot of oral history in Ken Burns' documentaries on the Civil War and Baseball (eyewitnesses telling what they themselves had seen or experienced), as you do in studies of the holocaust, the Second World War, and so on. There comes a time, of course, when oral history can no longer be written. The eyewitnesses have died and those who heard them give their accounts are also dead. So the time came for the Gospels to be written to preserve the eyewitness history and the four Gospels were so written and well within the time when at least some, if not many eyewitnesses were still alive.

As he begins his argument Prof. Bauckham points out that not only did the early Christians *say* that eyewitness testimony was key to their confidence in the reliability of their accounts of what had transpired – as in the text we read this evening from 1 Cor. 15, as in the prologue to Luke’s Gospel, and as in the testimony of the Apostle Paul – but, in this they took the same view that was generally held by ancient historians and, for that matter, is held today by modern historians. We tend to think of the ancients as unduly credulous and uncritical; that they were people who found it easy to believe unbelievable things. But actually they were as concerned about the facts as we are and they knew very well that eyewitness testimony was best. Even better was a participant rather than a mere observer because a participant is more involved in what is happening, remembers better, and understands the meaning better than a disinterested observer. Josephus, also in the first century, claimed for his authority to write a history of the Jewish War the fact that he was not only an eyewitness of many of the events but a participant in them. And Josephus is regarded as a reliable source of information on the Jewish war as a result.

From these introductory considerations Prof. Bauckham builds his case that eyewitness testimony undergirds the written Gospels, that they are, as they purport to be a record of *precisely what happened* as the events were observed first hand by those who were there and were participants in the Lord’s ministry. The argument comes in several parts.

I. *First there is the evidence of named persons in the Gospel accounts.*

It is a very interesting fact, long recognized, that a few people are named in the Gospels, but most are not. And it is even more complicated a picture than at first you might think. Some figures are named in one Gospel but not in another. For example, the woman who anointed Jesus before his death is unnamed in the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – but identified as Mary of Bethany in the Gospel of John. Bartimaeus, the blind man who was healed outside Jericho on the Jerusalem road is identified by name in Mark but not in Matthew or Luke. Many different explanations have been offered to explain these phenomena of named and unnamed individuals in the Gospel histories but Bauckham argues persuasively that the simplest explanation and the one that accounts for all the data is that the Gospel writer is identifying his sources; he is naming the eyewitnesses whose testimony lies beneath his account. The more precise study of Palestinian names has been made possible by the recent publication of an Israeli scholar, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*. Thanks to this work we know a great deal more about Jewish names in the first century.

Consider the text we read this morning from Luke 24. Cleopas, one of the two men that Jesus met on the road to Emmaus, is identified by name; his companion is not. There seems no plausible reason for naming him, says Bauckham, other than to indicate that he is the source of Luke’s information. Bauckham goes on:

“He is very probably the same person as Clopas, whose wife Mary appears among the women at the cross in John 19:25. Clopas is a very rare Semitic form of the Greek name Cleopas, so rare that we can be certain this is the Clopas who, according to Hegesippus, was the brother of Jesus’ father Joseph and the father of Simon, who [according to Eusebius] succeeded his cousin James as leader of the Jerusalem church. Cleopas/Clophas was doubtless one of those relatives of Jesus

who played a prominent role in the Palestinian Jewish Christian movement. The story Luke tells would have been essentially the story Cleopas himself told about his encounter with the risen Jesus.” [47]

Or consider the place of the testimony of the women as eyewitnesses of both the death of Jesus and the empty tomb Easter morning.

“All three Synoptic Gospels repeatedly make the women the subjects of verbs of seeing: they “saw” the events as Jesus died..., they “saw” where he was laid in the tomb..., they went on the first day of the week to “see” the tomb..., they “saw” the stone rolled away..., they “saw” the young man sitting on the right side..., and the angel invited them to “see” the empty place where Jesus’ body had lain.... It could hardly be clearer that the Gospels are appealing to their role as eyewitnesses.” [48]

There is a great deal more detail in Bauckham’s discussion of the named individuals but he makes an impressive case that we know their names precisely because they were eyewitnesses upon whose testimony the Gospel writers constructed their accounts.

He also spends a great deal of time discussing the Twelve as the principle body of eyewitnesses able to give first-hand testimony about Jesus’ life and ministry from the beginning of that ministry to its end. One among many interesting details is the use of Peter in the Gospel of Mark as an *inclusio* in the Gospel. He is the first disciple named in the Gospel narrative of Mark and he is the last disciple named. It is another way in which the Gospel of Mark is identified as the eyewitness account of the Apostle Peter. [124-125] I won’t take the time to explain but the same thing is done, more subtly, in the Gospel of John. John is mentioned at the beginning and the end of the Gospel as the source of the eyewitness testimony that is reported in the Gospel. What makes this more interesting and important is that the same device is found used in other histories of the general period. [132-147]

In any case, putting a number of specific eyewitnesses back into the picture creates a very different picture of the origin of the Gospel accounts. Now the reports of the people who were there and saw what happened are the foundation of the written record, which, of course, is precisely what is claimed in the New Testament.

II. *Second, Bauckham demonstrates that the prejudice against ancient people’s inability to distinguish between fact and folk-lore is not tenable.*

The idea that has been accepted for a long time in much of biblical scholarship is that ancient peoples couldn’t tell the difference and didn’t care to tell the difference between legends and real history. It is a feature of the typical arrogance of modern people who imagine themselves so much more sophisticated than people of former times. In fact, as much recent research has demonstrated, oral societies, as most ancient societies were – when books were either unavailable or very expensive – knew very well how to distinguish between tales and historical accounts, between fiction and fact, between anonymous folk stories and historical records based

on testimony. They knew how to check oral accounts for accuracy and they cared that they were accurate. [305] Bauckham relates the evidence and then summarizes the point:

“This distinction between tales and accounts refutes all claims that Gospel scholars...have made to the effect that early Christians, in the transmission of Jesus traditions, would not have made any distinction between the past time of the history of Jesus and their own present *because oral societies and their traditions do not make such distinctions*. This is untrue.” [273]

What is more, the evidence suggests that oral history in such societies was regularly preserved with little distortion over periods of time far greater than that separating the events of Jesus life and the writing down the record of those events in the Gospels, a period of no more than forty or fifty years. The fact is that early Christians had a genuine sense of the past as past and were concerned to preserve an accurate account of the past. The presence of eyewitnesses both enabled them to do that and assured that distortions, should they have crept into the tradition, would have been corrected and removed in the written histories of the Gospels.

III. *Third, Bauckham reminds us of the universal place of memorization in ancient education and learning.*

I mention this only briefly, but the point is worth repeating. In the ancient world it would have been utterly unusual if the sayings of Jesus and the accounts of his life *had not been committed to memory* and then passed on verbatim. In our world, where it is not necessary to memorize things because we can recall or reproduce information so easily, it is hard for us to realize how cultivated and remarkable were the powers of memorization in the ancient world. In other words, there is no reason to suppose that the stories would inevitably have changed in the retelling. Quite the contrary, that society knew how to tell a story the same way time after time: they committed it to memory. Everyone did this and did it very well.

I will just add at this point the fact that it is also now known that a great deal of notebook writing was done in the first century and there is little reason to suppose that the accounts of Jesus ministry were not written down in some form very early on. This is another way in which eyewitness accounts were transmitted with little distortion across the few decades to the time of the writing of the Gospels.

IV. *Fourth, Bauckham draws on fascinating recent research into the nature and reliability of memory to demonstrate that there are features of eyewitness accounts of events that are distinctive.*

We all know that memory is fallible. Our memories can be distorted. Different people remember the same thing differently. Our memories can play tricks on us, so that even when we feel certain something happened a certain way, it can turn out that we were wrong and things actually happened differently. On the other hand, most people’s everyday memories are pretty reliable even concerning events that transpired a long time ago. [319]

But research has identified what sorts of memories are likely to be most reliable and the following factors seem to be of the greatest importance. 1) That it was a unique or unusual event; something we might call “memorable”; 2) that it was important to the person remembering it; 3) that it was an event in which the person was emotionally involved; 4) that it is remembered vividly, the more vivid the more likely the event is accurately remembered; 5) that irrelevant details are generally not remembered; not exclusively, of course; but the more it is the main gist of the event that is remembered the more likely that it is remembered correctly; 6) memories are more likely to be accurate that omit specific dates and times, the details most likely to be remembered incorrectly; 7) and those memories are most likely to be accurate that have been frequently recalled and rehearsed. Bauckham then examines the Gospels in terms of these factors controlling the reliability of memories and demonstrates that the Gospel accounts fit these characteristics very neatly. [341-346] For example, in the Gospel narratives we encounter few irrelevant details, there is little to nothing in the way of dates and exact times, the events reported were obviously unique and profoundly important to the people who witnessed them, the reports are characterized by an extraordinary vividness that still strikes us across the centuries, and in the nature of the case these were memories frequently recalled and retold. Everywhere the eyewitnesses went they would have told and been begged to tell their recollections again and again. Of course we are leaving out of consideration the work of the Holy Spirit and the Lord’s promise to bring to the minds of his Apostles all that he had taught them!

There is more; much more; but I don’t want this to become tedious. Let me sum up. At the beginning and the end of his book Bauckham carefully examines the testimony of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in the early years of the second century, who makes much of the testimony of the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry. We only have Papias in a citation in Eusebius’ 4th century church history, but there is no reason to doubt the substantial accuracy of the citation. Papias says that from the time he was a young man he took care to consult the very best testimony about the Lord’s life and work. Papias says that when he was a young man, say A.D. 80, there were three sources of information about Jesus available to him: the eyewitnesses themselves, the elders who sat at their feet, and the disciples of the elders. And at that time many members of each group *were still alive*. But by this time the Gospels were either already written or were being written. Papias makes much of the fact that it was obviously better to hear from an eyewitness than from a second-hand source. The closer one can get to the event itself the more reliable the report. He understood that principle as we all do today.

All of this argument about eyewitness testimony is, to be sure, but one piece of evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts. I don’t expect large numbers of biblical scholars of the liberal type to fall to their knees and cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” We know very well how impervious unbelief can be to facts. The New Testament, the Gospels themselves, bear their own powerful witness to the fact that evidence, no matter how powerful, never by itself made anyone a Christian.

The importance lies here: liberal scholarship has long thought that the only way to account for the miraculous in the Gospels – and perhaps especially the resurrection of Jesus; for if you admit the resurrection you admit all – is to separate the record of it in the four Gospels from the actual

events of Jesus' life and ministry. They did this by supposing that the stories were told and retold over years and changed and became more "supernatural" over time under the influence of the church's developing beliefs about Jesus. But if eyewitnesses were exercising direct control over the transmission of the history up to the time it was written down in the Gospels, if ancient culture and the Jews in particular knew very well the difference between tales and history, if they cared a great deal to get the account right, if they knew how to preserve accounts very accurately even when they were being transmitted orally, if they had also had access to notebooks, and if the time between event and written record was as short as it was in this case, you can no longer suppose a period of creative alteration of the tradition between Jesus' own day and the writing of the Gospels. It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that what we have in the four Gospels is what those who were there at the time saw Jesus do and heard him say.

You could claim that the witnesses all lied, but no one makes that claim. It is outrageous on its face. There were too many witnesses. Their characters are too open to us even at this distance. It is virtually impossible – the facts being what they are – to come to any other conclusion but that the startling, utterly unprecedented events recorded in the Gospels, including and especially the resurrection of the Lord, happened as reported. The astonished folk who saw it all bore witness to what they saw and heard and it is their testimony that is recorded for us in the Gospels. They were entirely aware of how extraordinary were the claims that they were making. They were entirely aware of how their claims strained credibility: the blind being given their sight, lepers being healed, a man walking on water, and the dead being raised. But their claim was, astonishing or not, that *that is what they saw. They all saw it.* Some saw most of it; many saw only this remarkable event or that; but they saw what they saw and it is the record of that testimony that we have in the New Testament.

It was never an easy thing to get round this fact but it has got still harder thanks to Richard Bauckham's great book! Thank the Lord for that!