

How Do You Know What You Know Is True? [Slide 1]

How do you know what you know is true? Social scientists have produced a number of studies that indicate that people hold to their beliefs often in spite of evidence that their beliefs are false. For example Time Magazine in the October 15, 2012 issue reported on research conducted at Georgia State University where they presented assertions made by George W. Bush and John Kerry to a mixed group of conservatives and liberals. They then provided evidence that proved both George Bush and John Kerry's assertions were false. The conservatives believed John Kerry was wrong and the liberals believed George Bush was wrong after they were given the facts, but interestingly both groups persisted in believing that the person they supported was right even after being given the evidence to the contrary. In fact, both conservatives and liberals tended to believe even more strongly that they were right after being given evidence they were wrong. The researchers concluded that facts that contradict our biases actually have the effect of reinforcing them.

That's disturbing. When our cherished beliefs are challenged with hard facts, we tend to hunker down and believe even more strongly what the facts have just disproved.

This research raises the very important question: How do I know what I know is true? How can I know that I'm not just believing something because it's what I want to believe whether it's true or not? How do I know that Christianity is true? How do I distinguish between what is true and false? To put it another way, how do I fact check a world view?

There is a whole branch of philosophy called epistemology that deals with the question of how can I determine whether my knowledge corresponds to reality or not? Let's talk about some of the tools that we can use to discern fact from fiction. I'll start with scientific investigation because that is a key endeavor here in the Brazosport area. Science is a great tool to discover truth. The scientific method with its use of observation, generating of a hypothesis, repeated experimentation, and peer review is one of the best methods for determining truth in the material realm. No wonder most people hold conclusions drawn from Science with high regard.

Historical investigation is another tool for determining the truth of what happened. Historians make use of ancient documents, archaeological discoveries, and recorded eyewitness testimony to determine the truth of what happened in the past.

In the present we use surveys and statistics to measure beliefs, opinions, behaviors, values and a host of other things. We use logic to construct arguments to prove things. We make use of expert testimony to decide the truth. We use repeated experience to discover truth.

When we use these tools, the beliefs or conclusions we form are more likely to be true than if we just guessed at something, or consulted our feelings, or took a vote from other equally uninformed people.

Let me give you a simple illustration of what I am describing. I'm holding in my hands a puzzle box. I want to know the truth of how many puzzle pieces are in this box. Now, there is only one correct answer for the number of pieces in this box. There is one number that corresponds to the reality. I decide there are 250 pieces in this puzzle box. How do I know whether that is true or not?

I could use my psychic powers to confirm the number of puzzle pieces. Hmm! I'm just not feeling it today. I'm a little puzzled that it's not working. So, we better try a different method.

I could shake the box and feel the weight of it. When I shake the box I can definitely feel that there are more than one or two pieces by its weight and by its sound. How good is my epistemology? How confident can I be that I know the exact number of puzzle pieces?

Let's say I look at the box cover and I notice that it says this puzzle contains 300 pieces. Now, how confident am I? A whole lot more confident. It's not out of the realm of possibility that in the packaging of this puzzle that one or more pieces was lost, but the probability of that is very low. Except that there is one problem. This box has already been opened. Someone may have tried to already put this puzzle together, and may have lost a piece or so before they put the puzzle pieces back in the box. Now, I'm not quite as confident that I know the truth.

If I wanted to have absolute confidence that I know the number of puzzle pieces in this box, what would I have to do? I would have to count each individual piece, right? Okay. This may take a while. No, I'm not going to count them all, because I already did. This box has _____ puzzle pieces.

Our confidence that what we know is true should be determined by how we discovered it to be true, not by our political leanings, religious beliefs, or by our feelings. If you learned it from the internet or from social media there is a high probability that it's not true.

The last two weeks I have used tools to try to convince you that God created the universe and that he therefore exists. I have used the findings of modern astronomy that there is strong evidence for the Big Bang Theory. I've noted how the Big Bang theory is supported by observable things such as the amount of cosmic background radiation predicted by the theory as well as the red shift in light that occurs from stars moving away from us. I then used logic with the Law of Cause and Effect and the Law of Conservation of Energy to argue that only an eternal, all-powerful, personal, living, intelligent being could cause the universe.

We looked at fulfilled prophecy as an evidence that God exists and can predict the future. I used archaeological evidence, notably the Dead Sea Scrolls to claim that all the OT preexisted Jesus by at least one to two centuries. Comparison of the OT prophecies with the Gospel records shows that Jesus fulfilled those OT prophecies of the first coming of Christ. I then used a logic argument that Jesus predicted his resurrection, he claimed to be God, he was resurrected, and the only reasonable explanation for those events is that Jesus is God and God exists.

I specifically declined to use personal testimony such as how God changed my life and how he has answered my prayers because people in other religions can do the same thing and there is no easy way to prove who is right with competing subjective testimonies. So, I've already tried to model what it looks like to count the pieces in the Christianity puzzle box.

[Slide 2] Today I want to discuss why we think the Gospels and the Book of Acts are historically reliable documents. I believe the whole Bible is historically reliable but I'm narrowing my focus to the Gospels and Acts because those are the historical record books of the life of Jesus. The arguments I made last week about the resurrection of Jesus proving his deity and the existence of God depend upon the historical reliability of the Gospels and Acts. So, I'm confining my discussion to those five books.

The truth of every ancient history is evaluated the same way. Historians use certain tests to assess the historical reliability of ancient histories. The first test is for the reliability of the text itself. Rarely with historical documents do we possess the original. Almost always, what we possess are copies of the original. This is certainly true with the Bible.

[Slide 3] How confident are we that our Greek manuscript copies of the New Testament are the same as the original documents written by Matthew, John Mark, Luke, John and Acts written by Luke.

We are very confident, more confident than we are about any other history written around that time because we have so many Greek copies. We have almost six thousand copies of the New Testament. Most ancient documents have around 200 or less copies. The only book coming halfway close to the NT is Homer's *Odyssey* with about 1800 copies.

Second the time gap between when the original was written and our first existing copy is much less for the New Testament than any other ancient document. The John Rylands papyrus text of a few verses from the Gospel of John is dated about 125 AD and the Gospel of John is believed to have been written somewhere around 80 AD, a gap of a mere 40 years. The smallest gap between originals and copies among secular books is 200 years. Most gaps between the original and the earliest copy are 400 years or more for ancient documents.

Finally, one must ask what is the internal consistency between the copies? How many variant readings are there? Certainly, among the close to 6,000 copies of the NT we have, the words are not identical among the 6,000 copies. Copying errors did occur. Dr. Norman Geisler in his book, *When Skeptics Ask*, states that we have 100 % of the New Testament in our copies and we are sure about the original reading in 99.5% of the text. So, as far as the text itself is concerned, we have absolute confidence that we have the New Testament as it was originally written. Our translations are based on a completely reliable text.

[Slide 4] Now we get to the question of how reliable were the authors of the books? Matthew was one of the twelve main disciples of Jesus. The church Father Papias in AD 140 cited an earlier source that said the Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark from the testimony of the Apostle Peter. Luke, a companion of Paul, wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The apostle John, also one of the Twelve, wrote the Gospel of John. Two of the Gospels were written by the eyewitnesses themselves. Two of the Gospels were written by those who had access to the eyewitnesses.

Luke claimed to have interviewed the eyewitnesses. Luke at Luke 1:1-4 on your outline. Read. The apostle John claimed to be an eyewitness. Read John 21:24 and 1 John 1:1-3. Peter claimed to be an eyewitness. Read 2 Peter 1:16. All four Gospels were written within the lifespan of those who were witnesses of Jesus Christ. They all agree that Jesus died on the cross by order of Pontius Pilate and after three days Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them and others over a space of many days.

What reasons do we have to believe that these authors told the truth? First, much of what they wrote about was publically known. For example, the crucifixion and death of Jesus was a public event witnessed by Roman soldiers, followers of Jesus, religious leaders, and his enemies. The authors could not fabricate Jesus' death because there were too many people who could contradict any lies.

The Romans had access to Jesus' tomb and they guarded it. If the tomb was not empty it was no problem for them or the religious leaders to produce Jesus' corpse and kill Christianity before it ever started.

It's true that Jesus appeared resurrected to his followers, not to the general public. What is undeniable is that those followers, particularly the Eleven, changed from cowards who deserted Jesus to people who boldly and publically proclaimed they had seen Jesus resurrected. Most suffered and died for their belief. It is not reasonable to believe that the apostles lied about seeing Jesus and then suffered and died for that lie. 120 disciples gathered in the upper room and over 500 witnessed Jesus resurrected at one time. It is not reasonable to believe that all of these people engaged in a massive conspiracy to lie about Jesus and it never came out that they lied.

These people taught and practiced an ethic of honesty and truth telling. It's unreasonable then to think that they were all hypocrites, urging others to speak the truth while they hid behind one of the greatest lies of history. Ample evidence exists that the authors of the Gospels were reliable, honest people.

[Slide 5] Second, the testimony between the four Gospels and of Acts and even Paul's letters is internally consistent. Close examination of what critics claim to be contradictions reveals those examples not to be true contradictions. In the broad facts of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, the writers are in complete agreement.

[Slide 6] Third, the testimony of the Gospel writers is consistent with external testimony of those who lived during that time. Roman historians like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny confirm that Jesus was executed by Pontius Pilate, that from the beginning the Christians worshipped Jesus as a deity, and that they assembled to eat a meal together. The Jewish historian Josephus confirms that Pilate executed Jesus on a cross and that Jesus was a teacher and a doer of wonderful works. Other secular historians confirm that a darkness occurred at the time of the crucifixion and that the early believers believed in immortality. Although Judea was a backwater in the Roman Empire, still we have external sources that confirm key parts of the Gospel accounts.

[Slide 7] Does external evidence support the testimony? Archaeological discoveries have also supported the Gospel testimony. An ancient Latin inscription indicates the Romans conducted censuses in Judea requiring people to return to their home city for taxation purposes. In 1968 archaeologists discovered the skeletal remains of a man outside Jerusalem who had been crucified. His condition matched the Bible's description of Jesus crucifixion and his shinbones were broken, matching the Gospel of John's description that the Romans customarily broke the legs of those they crucified.

The Pilate stone unearthed in 1961 confirmed that Pilate had been the Roman ruler of the region at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. In 1990 workers broke through a First Century AD burial chamber and found the bones of Caiaphas, the Chief Priest who sentenced Jesus to death in the Sanhedrin.

Consider this testimony from archaeologists. The Jewish archaeologist, Nelson Glueck said, "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference." FF Bruce says, "Where Luke has been suspected of inaccuracy, and accuracy has been vindicated by some inscriptional evidence, it may be legitimate to say that archaeology has confirmed the New Testament record.

Finally, Sir William Ramsay writes:

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history . . . He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length . . . In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

People will suspect the Gospels because they report miracles and miracles are outside the world view of many. However, if you just look at the places and names and customs described, those things which archaeology can confirm, we find abundant evidence that the New Testament is historically reliable.

[Slide 8] Just to give you a sense of the significance of the Bible's historical reliability let me compare it to two other holy books, the Book of Mormon and the Quran.

The Quran is not a history book. It is more a series of sermons or messages. Very little of it refers to historical places or events. This contrasts with the Bible that is set in various historical contexts in Palestine, in Egypt, and in the Mediterranean world. You can't easily evaluate the historical reliability of the Quran because it records very little history. However, there are a few isolated statements in the Quran that are historically inaccurate. For example, in Surah 5:20 Moses supposedly says to the Jews that God has given them prophets and kings, but the first king of Israel was Saul hundreds of years after Moses. The prophets also started about that time with Samuel. In several Surahs, Pharaoh of Egypt supposedly threatened to crucify the Jews while they were in Egypt, but crucifixion wasn't invented until hundreds of years later.

The Book of Mormon has plenty of history set in North America, but none of it has been confirmed by archeologists. Some of its claims have been disproven. The Book of Mormon claims that cows, oxen, and horses were all in North America before the time of Christ when in fact they were all brought to North America by explorers and settlers after the time of Columbus about 1500 years later.

Mormon Egyptologist Dee Jay Nelson was asked in 1968 by the Mormon Church to translate the Joseph Smith Papyri fragments dated from 100 AD. They purportedly had been the basis for the book of Abraham in Smith's Pearl of Great Price. Nelson discovered that the text was actually part of an ancient pagan ritual of death and not what Smith had "translated" in the Book of Abraham ("Who Really Wrote the book of Mormon?", *Christianity Today*. July 8, 1977, pp. 32-34).

Mormon scholar, Thomas Murphy, contends that DNA research does not support the Book of Mormon claims that Native American Indians originated from a splinter group of Jews that migrated to the New World. Former Mormon scientist, Simon Southerton served as a Mormon bishop in Canberra, Australia. He wrote the book, *Losing a lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*. In an interview he says:

The DNA evidence backs up decades of archaeological, linguistic, cultural, and anthropological research that indicates there is no Israelite influence in the Americas before Columbus arrived. The only conclusion I could reach from this research was that The Book of Mormon does not contain a true history." ("Winning Them Softly", *Christianity Today*. February 2004, pp. 18-19)

Both of these books are supposedly divine revelations, but their God doesn't seem to know history any better than the human author.

How do Mormons know that the Book of Mormon is God's revelation? They will say that you should pray for God to reveal to you whether the Book of Mormon is his book and he will respond by moving in your heart to give you a warm feeling of assurance, a burning in your bosom that this book is true. They test the reliability of the Book of Mormon by subjective feelings rather than objective evidence.

We have a great capacity to deceive ourselves and to ignore anything that challenges our cherished beliefs. If you're content with the possibility of living forever in a make-believe or fantasy world and you don't care whether you're deceived or not, as long as you are comfortable and happy, then don't concern yourself with anything I have said. If you want to live in the truth and not be fooled or deceived, then keep asking "How do I know what I know is true?"