

On the Road to Emmaus: A Response to Andy Stanley's Sermon "The Bible Told Me So"

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"Jesus had to die on the cross, this I know, because Jesus told me the Old Testament tells me so." Not a catchy tune by any reckoning, but I can imagine two guys on the road to Emmaus singing this song after their encounter with Jesus where he explained to them from Moses and all the prophets that he, in fact, had to die on a cross and be raised from the dead on the third day (Lk 24:13-33). So you might be asking yourself what is the point of having two guys on a road to Emmaus rewrite a beloved children's song? The point comes from a sermon I heard the other



day from Andy Stanley in which he took umbrage with that children's song for specifically the point of saying that we believe Jesus loves us because the Bible tells us so. Towards the conclusion of his sermon Stanley said "Christianity does not hang by the thread of 'the Bible tells me so'. And if your church sent you off to college with that house of cards, I apologize." It is a shocking claim to make that "the Bible tells me so" is a house of cards in regards to faith, for which Stanley feels the need to apologize for all the churches who believe and teach that. It is my hope in the short time I have your attention, to show why I believe that if a person were to walk down the road with Andy Stanley they will arrive at a different understanding of Scripture than the one that Jesus gave as he walked down the road to Emmaus. I hope to show that the thread called "the Bible tells me so" that Stanley believes is so weak and frayed that it can't hold the faith of the church in the 21st century, is in fact the very thread that Jesus, Peter, and the other apostles highlight as one of the main reasons we are to believe in Jesus.

Let me start by saying that I am not overly familiar with Andy Stanley, having never listened to his sermons before. This sermon was brought to my attention by two separate colleagues and it raised my interest. Therefore, I am only able to interact with the content of this one message, and if I have taken Andy Stanley out of context I would be happy to

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be corrected. Having listened to the sermon, though, I don't think that I have taken him wrongly. Furthermore, I do think he is presenting this message with a great intention; reclaiming people to Christ who have walked away. The sermon comes in the context of a series in which he is reaching out to the younger generation who have come to see religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as meaningless and unnecessary for their life. It is with that intention that he addresses how we should understand the Bible and how he believes that his view will enable people who have walked away to come back with intellectual integrity. From the opening of his sermon he appears to be addressing mostly college educated people who were raised in evangelical homes and were told that the Bible is true and gives us the foundation for our faith. These kids eventually grew up and went to college where they met a professor who proceeded to inform them that various aspects of the Bible are incorrect, and the kid's naïve faith is subsequently shattered. This is a real event that happens over and over, but the answer I believe is not to redefine the nature of the Bible and its relation to our faith, but to equip student ministries to more deeply engage high school students with the Bible, the tough questions that the Bible raises and the equally tough questions that are raised against the Bible. Then hopefully, when they meet that college professor, they will not be encountering these issues for the first time. But that is another article that is yet to be written, so let's get back to Andy Stanley's argument. (I would encourage you to watch Stanley's sermon for yourself before you read this. You can find the sermon at <http://www.northpoint.org/messages/who-needs-god/the-bible-told-me-so/>

Stanley starts by saying that the problem many people have with Christianity is that they have adopted a view of Scripture that is fundamentally incorrect and that has put them in a corner from which the findings of modernity will not allow them to escape. Stanley captures this problem by highlighting the insufficiency of the song "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It is the idea that the Bible becomes the foundation of our beliefs that is troubling to Stanley and which he thinks has caused so many to walk away from Christianity once they realize that parts of the Bible are not true (Stanley assumes that many of the modern critiques of the Bible are valid). Stanley says that people who sang this song as a kid grew up, and the realities of this world have made it impossible to simply believe because the Bible says so. He builds up several points to make one overarching point, so let me give a few quotes to help you understand his position. He says "If the Bible is the foundation of our faith, as the Bible goes, so goes our faith." He also states, "If the entire Bible isn't true, the Bible isn't true." Stanley is clear that there are parts of the Bible that he considers not to be true, such as the walls of Jericho falling down or the exodus from Egypt happening as it is related in the Bible. He is wanting to be able to say that certain events in the Bible did not happen, but that other events did. He does not offer any criteria for deciding on which parts of the Bible go in what category. Since this is a 30-minute sermon, however, we can't expect to get all our questions answered,

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but this is one that he would need to provide if he doesn't want some college professor to not only discount the walls of Jericho falling, but Jesus coming back from the dead as well. He does not offer much in the way of showing why some parts of the Bible are to be believed, while others are not, and this leads into a major critique of his argument.

Stanley has too quickly capitulated to the findings of modernity. He is ready to say that since we have not found any archaeological evidence for the walls of Jericho coming down, then it never happened. He apparently is not aware that there are some archaeologists who argue that we do have some evidence that the walls fell, and that there have been other similar situations in which further findings refuted a position that discounted the Bible as being historically accurate. But even if there is no archaeological evidence, it does not by default demand that it never happened. Could the walls have fallen, and the rubble been carried away so that there was no trace of what happened left in the archaeological record? There is of course the evidence from the Bible itself that this event happened, but Stanley appears to discount this witness as valid testimony to the event happening. If there is a chance that it happened, we should be cautious in accepting a position which says it never happened.

Stanley also brings up the age of the earth as proof that the Bible is not true in regards to the creation story. I would only respond here that there are people who hold to the complete inspiration of Scripture and its infallibility, who differ on how to interpret Genesis 1 and other related passages regarding the age of the earth. A disagreement on how to interpret a passage is not the same as saying the passage is factually wrong. As an example, you can take someone like Millard Erickson who believes in the complete inspiration of Scripture and holds to a position that the earth is as old as Stanley claims it is. Stanley makes the claim that a person could not hold to the Bible as true and hold to an old earth position, and this is fundamentally incorrect, as proven by many theologians who do just that. While Stanley is correct in noting that many young people have become disillusioned with the Bible due to the findings of modern science, I would caution us from too readily capitulating our view on the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture to those findings. It wasn't too long ago that archaeologists and others were saying that most of the New Testament was written a few hundred years after the events it records, and yet new findings in the 20th century have shattered that consensus, as Stanley himself points out in his sermon.

The next area of concern that the sermon raises is his understanding of the nature of the Bible itself. He posits that Christianity does not exist because of the Bible, but that the Bible exists because of Christianity. At one level, he is correct in this assessment, in that the New Testament is relating events that had already happened, and the writings of the New Testament came about as a result of the apostles writing letters to churches that

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already existed. His position is true in this regard, but does not take into account the prophetic parts of the New Testament (but more on this in a moment when we look at how Jesus, and subsequently His followers, understood the Old Testament as a testimony to Jesus). What Stanley effectively does by this comment, and others that follow, is discount God's role in inspiring the writers of Scripture. The Bible becomes merely a human documentation of what God has done, in which God himself is not involved. Now to be fair, Stanley does not say this explicitly, but if we were to follow him down the path he is clearing I believe that is the destination we would reach. When you read the Bible, however, there are numerous places where God is said to be the author who is working with the human author of Scripture. For examples you can see 2 Timothy 3:16 (which by the way is in direct reference to the entire Old Testament), 2 Peter 1:20-21 and Acts 4:25. I only offer a few verses here as examples, but if you want a more thorough treatment you can see B. B. Warfield's classic *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*.

The Bible is more than just a record of what God has done, but is the means whereby God has committed to humanity the correct understanding of Himself. It is because God has directly committed himself to the production of Scripture by inspiration that the issue of inerrancy and infallibility become critical. If God is directly involved in the writing of Scripture, as Peter and Paul assert, then if there are errors in the Scriptures God is implicated in those errors, yet we know that God does not err. Stanley would have done well to give a fairer presentation of the evangelical understanding of inerrancy, such as that presented in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (you can read that at http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf). This statement addresses many of the underlying concerns that Stanley says people have with the Bible, yet he does not allow for the answers offered here to even be considered in his sermon.

Let me stay on the issue on inspiration for a moment longer. In the message, he says that the people who copied the New Testament books did not do so because they thought they were inspired, but because they thought they were true. While the original copyists indeed believed that what was written in the New Testament was true, I think the burden of proof lands on Stanley to show that they did not think they were also inspired, given the comments of both Paul and Peter in the passages cited above. The authority that Jesus passed on to the apostles was the basis for the writings of the apostles, and those validated by an apostle (Mark, Luke, etc.), being gathered together and copied. The idea that the Bible did not exist until the 3rd century is a naïve presentation of what happened in the preceding centuries.

During this time the church was busy reading, studying, following, and copying the books of the New Testament. When the church finally made its list of the books that it deemed to be Scripture, they had already been using just these books for centuries. It was

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not that the church randomly chose some letters and said they were Scripture, but instead the church acknowledged those books that had been considered inspired from its inception. I don't have time in this article to unpack the entire understanding of the apostolic authority that undergirds the New Testament, but If you want a fuller treatment you can read Herman Ridderbos' book *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*. In this book, Ridderbos effectively argues that the church did not create the canon of Scripture, but that the canon created the church. Arguing from the internal logic of the New Testament message itself, Ridderbos undercuts Stanley's position on how the 1st – 3rd century church would have understood the nature of the apostle's writings. In short, they would have seen just these writings as being inspired by the same Spirit who inspired the writers of the Old Testament, and hence what came to be known as the New Testament was repeatedly copied, because it was inspired. It is for this reason that Stanley's argument against the earliest copyists understanding what they were copying being inspired falls apart. They believed both that what they were copying was inspired and true. Stanley wants to separate two things that historically have not been separated, so that he can reject some of the parts of the Old Testament that he no longer believes to be true.

Furthermore, Stanley said that the 1st – 3rd century Christians believed that Jesus loved them before the Bible told them so. This statement, while supporting Stanley's thesis, runs completely contradictory to the facts and to his own presentation. It would appear that he is not counting the New Testament as being in existence until it was gathered together and officially codified by the church in the 3rd century. What this fails to understand is that the Christians of the first three centuries were collecting, copying, reading, retelling, and following the writings that are in the New Testament. By Stanley's own reckoning all the books of the NT were written before 70 AD and were copied and recopied because they were believed to be true, but not inspired. What Stanley gives with his right hand in the first part of his message, he tries to take away when it comes to how people came to faith in Christ. After the apostolic period, there were no more eyewitnesses to the life and resurrection of Jesus. It is for this reason that the church gathered together the writings of those commissioned by Jesus to be His spokesmen: the apostles. The church was founded upon the death and resurrection of Jesus through the teaching of the apostles. Those teachings were given initially by both word of mouth and in writing. When Peter and the other apostles finally passed away, it was their writings that continued to be the authoritative voice through which the church came to understand Jesus. The reason for this was because Jesus himself had given the apostles this authoritative role. This is why Paul in Ephesians 2:20 can write about the church being built on the foundation of the apostles, with Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.

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The final concern I have with Stanley's sermon is that he discounts the role that the Old Testament played in the apostles' understanding and faith in Jesus. He argues if a person came to Peter and told him that the walls of Jericho never fell, that Moses did not lead the people out of Egypt, and that the earth is really old, that Peter's response would be to say (and I am paraphrasing Stanley here) "I don't know what you're talking about, but I lived with Jesus for three years, saw miracles, and I know that he rose from the dead because I met him after he died. I am not following Jesus because of the Old Testament, but because I saw him." Stanley creates a dichotomy that pits Peter's personal experience against his understanding of the Old Testament. This is a competition that simply does not exist for Peter. His personal experience and the witness of the Old Testament are complementary for Peter, not contradictory as Stanley assumes.

To begin to unpack why I think Stanley gets Peter wrong on this point let's look at Luke 24:25-27. It reads, "And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." The setup for this passage is important, so let me give you some background. On the day of the resurrection two of Jesus' disciples, who remain nameless in the story, are traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus; a nearby village. As they are walking along, they are talking about the events of the past several days, trying to make sense of the crucifixion of Jesus and the reports that he was spotted alive that day. As they are walking, a stranger joins them (we are informed this is Jesus, but they don't recognize him until later) and asks what they are talking about. They respond that they are discussing a man named Jesus, who they thought was going to be the messiah. The crucifixion, however, had cast doubts over their understanding. It is at this point that Jesus spoke words that became programmatic for how his followers would come to understand the Old Testament. He tells them that they are foolish and slow to believe all that the prophets had said. He then proceeds to explain to them from Moses (Genesis- Deuteronomy) and all the prophets (this would include the prophetic writings, and most likely the remaining historical books Joshua-Nehemiah) that what had just happened to Jesus was what had to happen (note the necessity of Jesus' statement. It **HAD** to happen just this way). The Old Testament had prophesied this very event, but these two men had not been able to comprehend the Old Testament clearly. It took Jesus showing them from the Old Testament that his death and resurrection was what God had intended all along. Jesus was using the Old Testament to lead these two men to understand Himself and to have faith in Him. As we read through the rest of the New Testament it becomes obvious that the first Christians were deeply committed to explaining Jesus in light of the Old Testament. The primary evangelistic method employed is to convince people that Jesus is the messiah by showing them how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

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It is a weakness of our understanding of the Bible, not a weakness in the Bible itself, that would allow us to discard the Old Testament as if it were not absolutely critical to our understanding of both God and Jesus. The modern church has for far too long neglected the study of the Old Testament and its impact upon understanding Jesus correctly. And yet, Jesus gives us his own opinion on the Old Testament on the road to Emmaus. Not only there, but throughout his ministry he points us to the Old Testament and its importance. I will give too brief examples. In Matthew 5:18 Jesus says not the smallest stroke of the pen will pass away from the law until all is accomplished. Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He did not come to dispense with the Old Testament as unnecessary for our faith, but to bring the story in the OT to its fitting conclusion. Also, in Luke 22:20 Jesus relates that the cup he gives his disciples during the last supper symbolizes the blood of the new covenant that he would shed the next day. This reference to a new covenant makes no sense unless one is familiar with Jeremiah 31:31-34 in which the prophet declares that God will make a new covenant with his people. Unlike the covenant he made through Moses during the Exodus (which Stanley tacitly denies ever happened) this covenant will write God's law on the heart; not stone tablets. Both of these examples show that Jesus was deeply committed to the Old Testament, and it is no surprise that his followers were also.

So yes, Stanley is right that Peter believed in Jesus because he walked with him and was an eyewitness to Jesus' death and resurrection, but Stanley is incorrect when he discounts the deeply powerful evidentiary impact the Old Testament had upon Peter and the other apostles. Peter himself says in 2 Peter 1:16-21 that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' glory on the mount of Transfiguration. Furthermore, in v. 19 he says that we have the prophetic word (the Old Testament) more fully confirmed, to which we would do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place. I believe Peter's point is quite telling in relation to Stanley's message. Stanley wants us to believe the New Testament because the people who wrote it were eyewitnesses, but not because of the Old Testament. Peter (a person that Stanley wants us to believe) wants us to believe in Jesus both because he was an eyewitness and the Old Testament had predicted the coming of the messiah, including his death and resurrection. In fact, there is a good case to be made that what Peter is saying in 2 Peter 1:19 is that the prophetic word is even more convincing than his own eyewitness testimony. Peter, as he does in Acts, wants his readers to go back and see how Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the perfect plot twist to the Old Testament. God had been working his plan to redeem his creation from the beginning and had been leaving messages through the Old Testament as to how that plan would resolve itself. When Jesus showed up, he was the perfect plot twist to the Old Testament message. In a good plot twist, the twist resolves all the questions that were being asked earlier in the story and once you see the first part of the story in light of the plot twist, you are convinced there is no other way the story could make sense. Jesus does just that with the Old Testament.

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Once you see the Old Testament in light of Jesus, you will find the prophetic word made more sure to which we must pay attention as to a light shining in a dark place.

While I find Stanley's intention to reclaim people who have left Christianity both honorable and needed, I find that his solution to the "problem" of the Bible only creates more problems. In his attempt to connect with people who have bought into the modern critique of Scripture, he mistakenly throws out the only source the church has of knowing about Jesus. Stanley wants to say that our faith in Christ rests on something better than the Bible. That something better is the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' first followers. But we only have access to this testimony from the Bible and it is only Jesus' appointed messengers, the apostles, who have been given the authority from Jesus to be the foundation of the church in regards to how we are to understand His death and resurrection. Furthermore, these apostles had no qualms about referring to the Old Testament as a basis for being able to trust the message they were presenting about Jesus.

Jesus loves me this I know, for God in the Old Testament had foretold the coming of His Son to redeem us, because God so loved the world that He would not leave it or us under the curse. Jesus loves me this I know, for He died for my sins and he told the two men on the road to Emmaus that this was necessary in light of what God had already done and promised to do in the Old Testament. Jesus loves me this I know, for the eyewitnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection who wrote the New Testament put such great emphasis upon the Old Testament in which God recounts the first part of his story of redeeming us. Jesus loves me this I know, for God has spoken in the past through his prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son. Jesus loves me this I know, for Jesus called out his apostles, gave them the Spirit, and instructed the Spirit to inspire them to write the foundational documents of the Christian faith. In short, Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

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