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Are We Limiting God by Putting Him in the “Box” of Scripture?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether we're limiting God by putting him in the "box" of the 66 books of Scripture and how to respond to someone who continually talks about missing verses in the Bible and the idea that the Bible is owned by a corporation and isn't trustworthy.

* How would you respond to someone who says we're limiting God by putting him in the "box" of the 66 books of Scripture and we have no way of knowing all he has done or said because we're human and can only know so much about God?

* What would you say to someone who claims to be a Christian but continually talks about missing verses in the Bible and the idea that the Bible is owned by a corporation and is not trustworthy?

Transcript

You're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag STRS podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. Yeah, that's the right order. Alright, let's start with a question from Kate.

How do you respond to someone who says that putting God in the quote box of the 66 books of Scripture is limiting himself somehow and we have no way to know all he has done or said because we have no way to do that. We are human and can only know so much about God. I have to take a deep breath because it's kind of comment really bugs me.

Maybe here's a question. What if God limited himself to 66 books of revelation? I mean, that's the claim that we're making. It isn't the claim that we are limiting him that somehow out of nowhere we just thought, ah, 66, that's plenty.

You know, here it is this big giant thing. We got enough already. We're not going to add anymore to it.

Okay, that isn't the way it worked. The way it worked was more or less a recognition of

God's people that the texts that we received or they received were the authoritative words of God himself. Okay, now, of course, that it could be mistaken about that.

There are challenges to that that we can address, but that's not what's going on here. The claim here is just because we're saying there are these 66 books as if we were the ones who were saying it, making the decision, then, uh, then we are putting God in a box. But on our view, at least, it isn't us making the decision.

No one group making the decision. I heard Dan Wallace put it this way in a documentary, which we've referred, I've referred to before. God's an error.

No, not God's an error word. We talked about this before. You'll probably come up with the name.

I thought it was a really good one to find it on YouTube. The God who speaks. Yeah, the God who speaks.

And he said, uh, with regards to the canon, it's either an authoritative list of books or it's a list of authoritative books. Now, that's not wordplay. The point is, if it's an authoritative list of books, that means someone is taking upon themselves the role of being the authority to declare the books as God's books.

That would be the Roman Catholic Church's view of the canon. All right. Or, um, it is a list of books that are authoritative.

In other words, the authority is invested in the works themselves. The authority is not in the person who declares them to be such. And in fact, when you look at the history of the canon, that's the way it happened.

You don't have, I put in some people think this is a weakness where you, it's not until, you know, third century or fourth century. Do you have this authoritative, this list of authoritative books? Okay. So they didn't even know it's all politics.

Well, they did know in early on you have an acknowledgement of most of the works that we considered canon as being the rule. That's what the word canon means, the rule because they came from the rule makers, as it were, those disciples trained by Christ, not just disciples' apostles, that were authorized by Christ himself to produce authoritative doctrine for the church. And in their teaching, they were authoritative.

And in their writings, they were, and it was the writings that reflected their teaching that survived their death. And so these writings were then collected and acknowledged to be so. And you could see the early church fathers affirming that different aspects of these writings.

And it was later that they finally came up with the the New Testament list that that we

use as authoritative now. And the the apocryphal books, the in-between books, they were not canonized until 1500 years after Christ at the Council of Trent by the Roman Catholic Church. Now I'm not saying they weren't considered valuable and some consider them canon, but not everybody.

And there wasn't a unified understanding of that. And so the point I'm making here is what we have in the 66 books is a list of authoritative books. So this goes back to my opening comment.

Well, what if God himself limited himself to these 66 books? What if God limited himself? I get bugged with this putting God in a box kind of reference. It's just nutty. It's just nutty.

And what exactly are we doing when we're putting God in a box? Biblical argument that is contrary to an individual's personal view. And so they find fault with the view by saying, well, you're putting God in a box. Okay.

And I like Frank Beckwith's comment philosopher from Baylor and wrote a book with him a number of years ago. Good friend. He could turn a phrase.

And Frank says, I used to believe in reincarnation, but that was in a former life. For an example of a ability to you're the reason I always blame other people. That's Frank Beckwith.

Anyway, so here's what his observation in this case is when somebody else cannot beat you with an argument on a theological matter, they try to trump you with their own spirituality. Well, I can't refute your view. This is the subtext, right? I can't refute your view.

But I'm holier than you are. I'm more spiritual than you are. Okay.

And that's really what's at the heart of this claim. We've got theological reasons, rational arguments regarding the 66 books being the authorized canon. This is where God has spoken.

And somebody says, well, your, your God is smaller than mine. My God is not in a box. My God is free and can do whatever he wants.

And he gives he gives revelation wherever he wants. Well, of course, we agree with that in principle. God is free to do whatever he wants.

The question isn't what he's free to do. The question is what he has done. Okay.

And this is why this kind of responses just, it's, it's just childish. It's just infantile. It misses the point entirely.

What we're trying to figure out is where God has spoken. And what are our reasons to believe that that's the case? And the early church fathers understood the 66 books of this particular testament to be that because their source was authoritative. In the case of the New Testament, the apostolic witness, that's the principle concept and the recognition of all other churches and Christians that these books carried with them authority, they recognize the authority inherent in them.

Okay. So the person who thinks we're putting God in the box. Well, then where are the other texts? The other places where God has spoken authoritatively and inherently that you'd like to offer as an antidote, as an option.

Even the Roman church who offers additional sources of authoritative information, at least they seek to make the case. They're not just saying, Oh, you're putting God out of the box. That's silly.

That just tells me the person who makes this come in has no other good reasons to claim other revelation as authoritative. I think the key thing to know here when, when this person says we have no way of knowing all he has done or said because we are human and we can only know so much about God, the key difference to note here is that there's a difference between knowing fully, which we can't do and knowing truly, which we can do. And we can do it because we're made in the image of God and we are persons like God is a person.

And he's made it made us so that we can communicate with them and apprehend certain things about him that he tells us about. Now, we'll never know everything there is to know about God, but we can truly know the things that he has told us. And the truth that he's given us is by nature limiting.

And the reason why it's limiting is because God is himself and he's not, not himself. So when God says, this is who I am, all things that are opposite of that are not God. So he is limited, if you want to call it that, he's limited himself to this truth about himself.

So when God gives us 66 books of the Bible, those are the things that he thinks we need to know. It's not everything we need to know about God or it's not everything there is to know about God, but it's everything we need to know about God to know him truly to know who he is and who he is not. And so I suspect if someone says, if we're limiting ourselves to the 66 books, perhaps there's some sort of mystical thing they want to let into here, like visions or meditations or some sort of mystical experience of God that they want to allow in, but God has given us everything we need to know to know him truly.

And yes, there's only so much we can know, but we can know this. And this is what he's given us. It's not limiting, it's defining truth, truthfully defining, which of course is limiting, just as every definition is limiting, but in a legitimate way, not in an illegitimate

way.

Okay, so going on that kind of the same topic, Greg, here's a question from Lori. Lori, how do you respond to someone who continually talks about missing verses in the Bible? The Bible is owned by a corporation and is not trustworthy, who claims to be a Christian. This person does not read the Bible or attend church.

Well, there's a number of questions that come to mind on this. The standard question with people who claim to be Christian, but don't evidence a classic Christianity of any sort is what do they mean when they say they're Christian? Not trying to challenge that. I'm just curious, different people mean different things when they use the word.

In fact, 65% apparently of Americans, can self identify as Christian. Well, it's pretty obvious that 65% of the people of this country are not classic Christians. They are not holding to the classical standards of Christianity.

So they mean something else. They might mean, well, I'm not Jewish, and I'm not a pagan, and they're out Muslim, not a Hindu. So, and I think Jesus was cool.

And I believe in the golden rule. So that I'm not sure in this person's case, Laurie's friend's case, but that's the question they ask, and that might uncover some things. If she thinks verses are missing, then the question is how, what does she mean by that? I know I sound like a broken record, right? What exactly are you getting at here that verses are missing? Where are they missing? I mean, it's interesting when people say that, because you can read through any text in the New Testament, especially the pistols.

And there's a continuity there, a flow of thought. It's a letter from one person to another person or a group of people. So something is being communicated.

Now, there is a change of pace at different places. They shift to another topic. And I guess in between the shift, there could be paragraphs that are missing, but I don't know why anybody would say that.

And if they're missing verses, and by the way, there are things that are missing in some manuscripts, but there are so many manuscripts to compare one with another that the lacuna, so to speak, the missing piece really jumps out. Wow, why is it that all of these manuscripts have this line, but this other manuscript doesn't have it? Well, that might have been through a scribal error. I mean, that's the best way to understand that.

And not that that. I mean, if you want to claim that all of these manuscripts are missing something important, you'd have to have a reason for that. How would you know? But you must be, you must have in mind a pristine original that has a section in it that none of the manuscripts have.

And therefore, the manuscripts at our disposal are missing important things. But why would anyone say that? It must be a reason. And this is the deal with JP Marlboro wrote a piece once talking about autographs that is the original and why it's really important that we don't have the autographs.

You'd think it would be the other way around, but it's not. It's important that God did not allow the autographs to survive because if the autograph, that is the single sole document, is the key, then once that that could be toyed with, it could be altered, it could be destroyed, and then you're gone. When there's multiple copies that are made of the autograph, and then copies of those, and then copies of the third generation and subsequent thousands of copies with multiple generations, you're in a position now to compare all of these excuse me, to see if changes actually have been made.

It shows up very vividly. And this is the discipline of textual criticism, it allows us to do that. What's interesting is, of course, there's a Bart Urban who's written as an expert in the field, which he was he was trained by Bruce Metzger.

And so, and right after Bruce Metzger died, he started writing these popular pieces about how you can't trust the Bible. The New Testament documents have been messed with, you know, and at the back of his most famous work, probably the initial one, misquoting Jesus, there's an appendix and it said, here are the verses that are not in the original Bible. Now, it's very interesting to me, it's meant to shake people up.

But what's interesting to me is he has a textual critic, critic is able to separate the wheat from the chaff, which means he knows they weren't in the original. And therefore, we know what the original said. And most Bibles note when there was no surprises in that, hardly a single verse that I wasn't aware of that wasn't that was in that thing.

Most Bibles will note that not in earliest manuscripts, etc. Famously, the long ending of Mark and famously the woman caught in adultery. That appears in our Bibles at the end of John 8, at the end of 7 in the beginning.

Yeah. So, yeah, that showed up in different manuscripts at different times, different gospels, actually. And so, this is where it kind of settled out over time.

But there's a lot of reasons to believe that wasn't canonical. Okay. I actually think it took place for a number of reasons.

It's historically sound, but it's not canonical. Okay. So, in any event, so we know that, we know that for particular reasons.

So, if somebody says that there are these Bible verses that are missing, there are all kinds of missing Bible verses, or say that it's corporations, really? All these manuscripts are written long before corporations. So, where is she getting her understanding of how this took place? That's the question. Also, there's no, I mean, there are certain publishers

who have translations, but the actual Greek text that is determined by textual criticism, I don't think anyone has a copyright to that.

Nobody owns it. What is copyrighted are the collections of those things, like the Nestle's Greek text or whatever. There's a number of volumes where you can get with it, and all the variations and stuff.

You can go online and check them out, you know, they're all available. Nobody has a copyright on the originals or any of the text material. So, when you aggregate them together, that's your formation of that is something that's copyrightable, but not the text itself, not the Greek text itself.

I think what I would do, Laurie, is ask your friend to explain what the evidence is for what she believes about missing verses. I think a lot of times people just don't have an understanding of how the Bible was transmitted from one generation to the next, that it's geometric, it's not like one line of, you know, one person copies it out, and then the next person copies it out, and just in one long line, you could lose them that way. As you pointed out, there's there are whole families of manuscripts where five people copy from the one copy, and then five from each of those.

And so, you can look back and you can see what has been changed and where something's been taken out. But the thing is, it's always somewhere. And this is something I think Dan Wallace, I think I heard him say this.

We can be confident that we have everything that was originally written. Now, we might not know, okay, this verse, was this original? Was this not original? We have more. We have more.

Yeah, we were saying is that 110%. We're not going to come across something that we never saw before that's actually original. It's just not going to happen.

We have all the parts. It's just a matter now of figuring out what is original, what isn't. And there are a couple verses that are in question, hardly any at this point.

And like we said earlier, you can look in your Bible and it will say this, you know, it will save the verses in question. And so, you can always see that. It's nothing hidden.

There's nothing out there that has been taken away that we just don't have any record of. It's just not, it's not reasonable to think that's the case. Right.

So, the vast majority of these differences called textual variations are simply not viable, okay? That is, we can tell which are the mistakes and which aren't, okay? Sometimes singular citations. You have one manuscript that has this thing in. So, what's the chance that all these hundreds and thousands of other manuscripts left it out and this one got it right? That's unlikely, okay? But even when you have viable differences, that doesn't

mean that the difference is relevant in any theological sense.

It's just sometimes inconsequential. Some passages say Jesus Christ. Some say Christ Jesus.

Some say Lord Jesus Christ. Some say Jesus Christ. Okay, well, these are variants, okay? And even if you figure out what was the original rendering, I think everybody can see that no matter which rendering you use, the meaning of the text isn't changed in any significant fashion.

And so, this is the way that textual critics address these issues and come up with the confidence that Dan Wallace, a worldwide expert in this field, has come up with. And of course, all of these, everything that we've said here can help explain why it's incorrect to think this. But the question is, why does your friend think this? And I think you need to do a little more digging.

What do you think has been taken out? And I think that might give you a clue as to what's going on in her mind or his mind. I'm not sure. But what does she think is missing? Is it some theological idea? Is it what the logical idea is it? I think you might get an idea of what your friend truly believes.

And once you can find out what she believes and what she thinks is true, now you can talk to her about the truth and the gospel and maybe even leave aside this question for the moment and find out what it is that your friend believes and why. And then just discuss that belief and how Christianity is the truth and why the solution of Christianity to all the big questions is better than anything else because it's true, but it's also beautiful. So I think you have to do a little digging.

Recommendation too quickly. We mentioned sometime this morning and probably another show that a documentary, say the title of that again. I think it's the God who speaks.

It was in this. The God who speaks. Yeah.

Okay. The God who speaks and Dan Wallace is in that and a whole bunch of other people. But it's really done.

It's on YouTube. Yeah, it's on YouTube. I think we watched it on Amazon Prime or something like that.

The God who speaks, it's available. Just watch it. It's fun.

And get a copy of J. Warner Wallace's cold case Christianity. It's the 10th anniversary edition. It just came out about six weeks ago.

And it's fabulous. It really covers all of these bases in really fabulous fashion. So

particularly the idea, his research on the early church fathers, those who are disciples of Jesus disciples, disciples of the apostles and disciples of the disciples of the apostles.

And what they said about the content of the gospel. And you realize that these people spoke with one voice and they carried that same voice all the way through. And so we can not just looking at the text, but looking at what these people wrote during the flow of time, the passage of time that that marks and agrees with and quotes the texts in question.

All right. Thank you, Greg. And thank you, Kate and Lori.

If you have a question, send it to us on Twitter with the hashtag STSTRask or you can go through our website at str.org. Thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.