

Sunday, February 21, 2016—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 21 Internal Evidence of Inspiration: Undesigned Coincidences

*Please note that Brother Craig Holcom's lesson on Undesigned Coincidences from July 27, 2014 was used as a basis to write this lesson.*

### **Introduction**

- Since Lesson 18 we have been looking at the close connection between the Living Word (the Lord Jesus Christ) and the written word, i.e., the scriptures. In doing so we considered the attitude of the Living Word toward the written word (Lesson 19) as well as the attitude of the New Testament writers toward the scriptures (Lesson 20).
- In our day, the word of God is being attacked on all fronts. For example, the authenticity of the Biblical books is routinely questioned. For instance, critics have questioned who really wrote the gospels. Consider the following case in point; critics of God's word will say things like "the gospels are just forgeries". They weren't really written by the actual disciples of Jesus, they were written much later than the first century. They are for the most part just made up stories like the Lord of the Rings or the Narnia stories.
- While this type of attack on the veracity of God's word is nothing new, they began in earnest a couple hundred years ago with the advent of German Higher Criticism and the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).
- Over the last two centuries, Christian philosophers and theologians have sought to counter the arguments made by the opponents of the divine origin of scriptures. As we have seen, some, certainly not all, of the answers offered by Christian academia have not been helpful or productive and have altered the understanding of basic Christian doctrine amongst the faithful (Inspiration & Inerrancy).
- One area where Christian apologetics has shined brightest is in its presentation of the internal evidence of the Bible's divine origin.
- In this lesson we want to begin a consideration of the internal evidence found within scripture that speaks to having been inspired by God. Under the general category of internal evidence for inspiration I would like to consider the following points:
  - Undesigned Coincidences
  - Fulfilled Prophecy
- In this lesson we will use the notion of *Undesigned Coincidences (UC)* to demonstrate the reliability of the Bible. This discussion will extend to:

- The authenticity of the books—they were written by who they claim to have been written by.
- The genuineness of the books—they are trustworthy history, an accurate presentation of the material they report.
- In seeking to accomplish this task, we will first consider what *UC* are and then consider examples of them from both the four Gospels and the Pauline Epistles.

### What is an *Undesigned Coincidence*?

- In our day, the notion of *UC* as a defense of the Bible's divine nature has been championed loudly by Dr. Timothy McGrew, a professor of Philosophy at Western Michigan University.
- Dr. McGrew has produced a nine part lecture series on the reliability of the Bible in addition to participating in websites devoted to Christian Apologetics such as [Apologetics315.com](http://Apologetics315.com)
- While McGrew uses the notion of *UC* in his defense of the veracity of the Bible, he was not the first to do so. Earlier Christian thinkers and theologians to use *UC* in support of the Bible's truthfulness include:
  - William Paley—English Clergyman and Apologist: 1743-1805
    - [\*Horae Paulinae\*](#) (1790)
  - John James Blunt—English Anglican:1794-1855
    - [\*Undesigned Coincidences in the Writings Both of the Old and New Testament : An Argument of Their Veracity : With an Appendix, Containing Undesigned Coincidences Between the Gospels and Acts, and Josephus\*](#) (1851)
  - Edmund Bennett—American Lawyer: 1824-1898
    - [\*The Four Gospels From a Lawyer's Standpoint\*](#) (1899)
- According to William Paley, *UC* are markers of the authenticity of scripture and validate its reliability.
  - “The very particularity of St. Paul's epistles; the perpetual recurrence of names of persons and places; the frequent allusion to the incident of his private life, and the circumstances of his condition and history; and the connection and parallelism of these with the same circumstances in the Acts of the Apostles, so as to enable us, for the most part, to confront them one with another; as well as the relations which subsist between the circumstances, as mentioned or referred to in the different Epistles—afford no inconsiderable proof of the genuineness of the writings, and the reality of the transactions. For as no advertency is sufficient to guard against slips and contradictions, when circumstances are multiplied, and when they are liable to be detected by

contemporary accounts equally circumstantial, an imposter, I should expect, would either have avoided particulars entirely, contenting himself with doctrinal discussion, moral precepts, and general reflections; or if, for the sake of imitating St. Paul's style, he should have thought it necessary to intersperse his composition with names and circumstances, he would have placed them out of the reach of comparison with the history." (Paley, 168)

- In short, *UC* provide us with evidence for the reliability and truthfulness for what the Biblical writers report in a way that made up stories or simply copies of made up stories or forgeries claiming to report events not really witnessed could not provide.
- Dr. McGrew states the following regarding *UC*:
  - "Sometimes two works by different authors (for example Acts, which was written by Luke, and the Pauline epistles) interlock in a way that would be very unlikely if one were copied from the other or both were copied from a common source. For example, one book may mention in passing a detail that answers a question raised by the other. The two records fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Fictions and forgeries aren't like that. Why would a forger leave loose ends, unanswered questions? And how could a forger control what another writes to make it interlock with what you have written? But this is what we expect to find when both writers are talking about real historical events that they both are familiar with." (McGrew)

- When we see parallel passages in the N.T. we usually simply see one as filling in a few more details not supplied in the other account. But sometimes they supply much more than that, especially when we find details in passages that are not even in the same context as another passage.
- When considering *UC* it is important to keep in mind that we have the luxury of possessing a completed Bible. We have all twenty seven New Testament books bound together in one book. Consequently, we sometimes miss or don't think about things like these *UC*. Bear in mind that the New Testament books were not originally bound together in one book. Rather they were twenty seven separate books written by eight to nine different men. That is what makes the cumulative force of this argument for the genuineness of the Bible so strong.

### **Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels**

- Regarding why there are four gospel accounts and not more or less, Christians have typically stated the following:
  - Each presents a different quality of Christ's character: 1) Matthew as King, 2) Mark as Suffering servant, 3) Luke as the Son of Man, and 4) John as Deity.
  - Via all four gospels we get a full picture of who Christ is through the four different accounts.
- While these are valid points, there is more. As stated above, when we compare them, they provide us with evidence for the reliability and truthfulness of what they report in a way that made up stories or simply copies of made up stories or forgeries claiming to report events not really witnessed could not provide.

- Critics of the New Testament claim that the Gospels are just copies of made up stories. They will say things like, Matthew just copied Mark and made up some stuff of his own to go along with it. Like if we went and bought a copy of the Grand Rapids press and then bought another copy to verify what we read in the first copy. Consequently, the critics will tell us that we can't use the gospels as separate independent witnesses.
- Dr. McGrew disagrees. He maintains that by noting the *UC* in the gospel narratives we build a case that "the Gospel authors were well informed and habitually truthful."

#### *UC #1—Waiting to be Healed*

- Matthew 8:14-16— so if the people believed that Jesus could heal them, why did they wait till evening? If you were sick would you want to wait to get in to see a Doctor?
- Mark 1:21, 29-32—Mark tells the same story, but he gives us this detail in verse 21, "straightway on the sabbath day. . ." The reason the people waited till evening in Matthew 8 is because they were waiting for the Sabbath to end.
- So do you see here how these accounts interlock? Was Matthew simply copying from Mark? No, why would he leave out this detail. Was Mark copying Matthew? No, Matthew doesn't even include the detail.
  - Mark is explaining Matthew
- So a skeptic could come along and say, "Well Matthew could have copied from Mark and just left out that little detail. While this admittedly could be the case in one instance, if we have numerous instances like this, it builds the case that it is more than just accidental. It builds a case of cumulative force, which makes it ridiculous to claim accident or forgery.

#### *UC#2—Tell No Man*

- Luke 9:28-36—why did they tell "no man in those days any of those things which they had seen?"
- Mark 9:9-10—so Mark gives us the command whereas Luke gives us what they did while offering no explanation for it. Luke just leaves the reader with a curious reaction on the part of the disciples.
  - Now we have Mark explaining something from Matthew and Luke

#### *UC#3—The Feeding of the 5,000*

- Mark 6:31, 39—Mark's account of the feeding of the 5,000 gives two details that the other gospel writers do not.
  - Verse 31—" . . .many were coming and going and they had no leisure so much as to eat."
  - Verse 39—And he commanded them to make all sit down by companies upon the green grass.

- Show picture. Why would Mark say this?
- John 6:4—John tells us that the context for the feeding of the 5,000 was during the Passover season. Passover is in the midst of the growing season, the only time of year when there would have been “much green grass” spoken of in Mark. In addition, this also explains the reason “Many were coming and going and they had no leisure so much as to eat.” The first century Jewish historian Josephus stated there may have been as many as one million pilgrims in Jerusalem at Passover. Even if he is exaggerating, there must have been a mass of people and this explains this detail given in Mark.
  - So now we have Mark explaining something found in Matthew and Luke and we have John explaining something found in Mark.
- Notice the way this is happening? Mark doesn’t tell us why there were many people coming and going. John doesn’t tell us that there were many coming and going, but he gives us the explanation for it. See how the accounts interlock in this *undesigned* manner?

#### *UC#4—Events in Herod’s Place*

- Matthew 14:1-2—two questions arise here that are not answered by Matthew. First, why would Herod be talking to his servants about this? Does this seem a bit odd? Someone of Herod’s stature discussing something of this nature with servants? Second, how would Matthew know what Herod was talking about in his Palace?
- Luke 8:3— Luke, in a totally different context, when talking about women who ministered to Jesus mentions “Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward.
  - Here we see in a totally different context, a totally undesigned interlocking of Luke and Matthew.
- Would anyone think Luke would have made up this information about Joanna in a totally different context just to explain Matthew? Don’t miss what’s happening, each of the gospels is explaining things in other gospels in a non-deliberate, undesigned way that gives them the mark of truth.

#### *UC#5—Mighty Works in Bethsaida*

- Matthew 11:21—what are the mighty works Matthew is talking about? For Chorazin the Bible doesn’t tell us. But for Bethsaida we may find an answer. Wouldn’t that be fortunate for us?
- John 6:5—why Phillip? Philip is not really a major character.
- Luke 9:10-11—in Luke, Bethsaida is the setting for the feeding of the 5,000.
- John 12:21—look at the interlocking of Luke and John. Luke doesn’t mention Philip in this context at all. Meanwhile, John doesn’t mention Bethsaida as the setting of the miracle. Only by putting the two accounts together can we understand why Jesus speaks to Phillip in John 6.

- We see that John and Luke interlock.
- As to the mighty works done in Bethsaida in Matthew 11 one needs Luke 9 to learn that Bethsaida was where the feeding of the 5,000 took place. Also note that Matthew gives the account of the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 14, after the woes are pronounced in Matthew 11. This is on account of the fact that Matthew arranges things thematically rather than chronologically. By comparing Luke, who arranges his account chronologically, we find that the feeding of the 5,000 took place before the woes were pronounced.
  - Luke explains and informs Matthew

#### *UC#6—I Will Destroy This Temple*

- Mark 14:58, 15:29—In Mark 14 the Jews, before the high priest, at Jesus’ trial, make the accusation “we heard Him say I will destroy this temple”... Later in chapter 15, they mockingly throw this accusation at Jesus while on the cross. There is nothing in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, or Luke) that could have been the pretext for this accusation.
- John 2:18-19—the Jews don’t get what He is talking about. John gives the original statement but not the accusation; the synoptic gospels give us the accusation but not the original statement. Only by putting the two together do we get the whole picture.

#### *UC#7—Jesus Questions Peter*

- John 21:15—this example is interesting because the context is after the resurrection. So a mark of authenticity here would be extremely important. Notice carefully the content of what Christ asks Peter: “do you love me more than these...” Without a context, Christ’s question seems challenging and mean. The context is not found in John.
- Matthew 26:33—Matthew records this boast although John does not. Also remember right after this Peter denies knowing the Lord three times. Another connection between John and the synoptic gospels is where Christ asks the question three times and the synoptics where Peter denies Christ.

#### *UC#8—Jews Accusation Against Jesus*

- Luke 23:2-4—the Jews make this grave accusation against Jesus, “He is claiming to be a king.” The Jews want Jesus put to death for blasphemy, but why would Pilate care about that? Pilate was probably blasphemer himself. So they bring this charge that would be a clear violation of Roman law. Christ claiming to be king.
- But look at Pilate’s response. Christ admits to the charge and Pilate says “I find no guilt in this Man.” The Jews had to have been highly annoyed at this point. So why does Pilate find no guilt?
- John 18:33-38—Pilate asks “are you king of the Jews?” Jesus answers “my kingdom is not of this world”. Pilate surmises this is a spiritual kingdom (i.e. make believe). Pilate thus pronounces “I find no fault in this Man”.
  - Only by comparing Luke and John do we get the full story.

## Conclusion

- “We are not left merely to guess what forgery looks like. The gnostic “gospels” of the second century afford us a clear illustration of how writers of the time who were forging a document on the basis of documents already known make use of their material. Thus, the “Gospel of Peter” is studded with phrases that sound like they have been lifted directly from the canonical Gospels:
  - “And one of them brought a crown of thorns and put it on the head of the Lord.” (cf. Mark 15:17)
  - “And they brought two malefactors, and they crucified the Lord between them.” (cf. Luke 23:32-33)
  - “And in that hour the veil of the temple in Jerusalem was rent in twain.” (cf. Mark 15:38)
  - “But who shall roll away for us the stone ...?” (cf. Mark 16:3)
  - “Whom seek ye? Him that was crucified? He is risen and gone.” (cf. Mark 16:6)

The degree of verbal similarity between the Synoptic Gospels and the “Gospel of Peter” is high precisely because the forger—and he must be a forger, for he is writing long after Peter’s death—wants to create a certain effect. He wants to give a ring of authenticity to the text he is manufacturing in order to ensure its favorable reception in a community where the established texts carry high prestige.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 3](#))

- Notice there is at least one line between all the gospels. Critics make a big deal about which gospel was written first, who copied from who etc. The force of this evidence is that it doesn’t matter. This evidence points to independent testimony. The gospels are four separate witnesses giving accurate truthful accounts of actual historical events.
- These *UC* serve as internal proof of the Bible’s inspiration. Only a book written under divine inspiration would exhibit characteristics such as these.

### **Works Cited**

Holcom, Craig. [Undesigned Coincidences](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Life Bible Church, July 27, 2014.

McGrew, Timothy. [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 3](#).  
<http://christianapologeticsalliance.com/2013/09/29/undesigned-coincidences-part-3/>

Paley, William. [The Complete Works of William Paley](#). Philadelphia, PA: Crissy & Markley, 1830.

### Resources by Dr. Timothy McGrew

[Undesigned Coincidences Series](#) of articles by Dr. Timothy McGrew on Apolgetics315.com

Video series by Dr. Timothy McGrew on the Apologetics315 YouTube page.

- [Who Wrote the Gospels?](#)
- [External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels](#)
- [Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels, Part 2](#)
- [Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels \(Matthew & Mark\)](#)
- [Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels \(Luke & John\)](#)
- [Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels](#)
- [Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 2](#)
- [The Resurrection of Jesus](#)