

Sunday, May 8, 2022—Truth & Censorship in Post-Athenian America: Thy Word is Truth, Part 2
(Undesigned Coincidences)

Introduction

- Last Sunday we continued our current series by looking at the expression John 17:17.
- We looked at the issue of fulfilled prophecy as the greatest divine apologetic as to the authenticity and veracity of scripture.
- John 6:63
- This morning I would like to look at least one more issue before concluding this series and that is the issue of undesigned coincidences as internal proof of inspiration.

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
- 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 Pauline Epistles

- In his [*Horae Paulinae*](#) (1790), William Paley examines the Book of Acts, on the one hand, and the Pauline epistles, on the other, with a view to showing how each might illustrate the other. Paley's *Horae Paulinae*, was the first work to explore this sort of argument in detail. Paley's object is to show the numerous correspondences between the Pauline epistles and the book of Acts.

- “Paley stresses, in the first chapter of the *Horae Paulinae*, that the indirectness, the evident undesignedness, is what makes these coincidences significant. The information that makes the passages from the epistles interlock with the history is dropped casually and naturally into the narrative. By contrast, although there is a very close verbal parallel between Paul’s description of the last supper in I Corinthians 11:24-25 and the words of institution in Luke 22:17-20, this coincidence might easily be explained by the hypothesis that one of the sources is copied from the other. That is not to say that either author actually did copy from the other. But when the points of coincidence are too obvious, the correspondence might have been forged after the historical work became well known, or vice versa.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 2](#))
- “If there were only a small number of undesigned coincidences, we might shrug them off as statistical noise. After all, in a large box of jigsaw puzzle pieces taken at random, one piece, from many different puzzles, someone searching with great patience might find a few pairs that fit together (more or less) by sheer accident. But when a large number of pieces fit together, sometimes in clusters, the chance explanation rapidly becomes absurd. That is why, to appreciate the force of the argument from undesigned coincidences, we must have the patience to work through multiple examples. But the picture that emerges when we take the time to do this will amply repay us for the labor and study we bestow on the project.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 2](#))

Pauline UC#1—I am of Paul and I am of Apollos

- I Corinthians 1:12, 3:6—both of these verses suggest that Apollos had been at Corinth; the second also suggests that Paul had preceded him there.
- Acts 18:19, 23, 26; 19:1—“after his first visit to Greece, Paul went from Corinth to Ephesus, where he left his companions Priscilla and Aquilla; he returned to Palestine, stopping in Jerusalem, and then went north into Asia Minor (Acts 18:19, 23), ultimately making his way back to Ephesus. It is during the period of these later travels that Apollos comes on the scene, being instructed in Ephesus by Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:26) and passing from them over to Achaia, where “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed” (Acts 18:27). We might have inferred from this alone that Apollos went to Corinth on this trip, but we need not stop here, as we find that Paul came back to Ephesus at the very time that Apollos was in Corinth (Acts 19:1).” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 2](#))

Pauline UC#2—Letters of Commendation

- There is a further point of coincidence, equally indirect, between this passage of Acts and an expression Paul uses when remonstrating with the Corinthians in his second epistle.
- II Corinthians 3:1-2

- Acts 18:27—as it happens, the book of Acts provides the clue to Paul’s language; for when Apollos, having been instructed by Priscilla and Aquilla, made his own trip to Corinth, “the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him” (Acts 18:27).
- “What should we infer from the way that the book of Acts interlocks with the Corinthian epistles? The examples we have looked at here offer us some evidence that the authors of each were well informed and habitually truthful. That falls short of a demonstration, of course, but all historical evidence falls short of mathematical demonstration. The case is a *prima facie* one, and it would be strengthened if we found other, similar arguments with respect to these texts. Paley gives a dozen for each of these epistles.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 2](#))

Pauline UC#3—Contribution for the Poor Saints at Jerusalem

- “One of the benefits of having both Paul’s letters and a history of Paul’s activities (the book of Acts) from another hand is that we are able to compare points of contact across the two genres. Their overlap is all the more valuable since they appear to have been written largely or wholly independently of one another, with very little verbal similarity at any point.

What should we expect from such material, if each is independently grounded in the facts? With luck, and if the material is extensive, we should be able to find multiple instances where the documents refer to the same people or events. Of course we should not expect the history and the letters to correspond point-for-point; in the nature of the case, there will be much in the letters that would be out of place in the history, while the history—in keeping with the historical standards of the times—may organize material conceptually rather than chronologically and may compress or pass over some incidents in the course of the narration. And occasionally, the correspondences may cross over several letters, creating a network of related passages that cannot with any plausibility be dismissed as fabrication or forgery.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 3](#))

- Romans 15:25-26—here we have three points of interest all in the same passage in one of the letters: a collection being take up in Macedonia, a similar collection in Achaia, and Paul’s plan to travel to Jerusalem to take this aid to the saints there.
- Acts 20:2-3—we find Paul on the way back to Palestine, but there is not a word about a contribution.
- Acts 24:17-19—Paul mentions that he came to bring alms to his countrymen, but there is no mention of where the monies come from.
- The points of correspondence are so indirect that there is no suspicion of copying here. Two other passages from the letters enable us to fill out the picture.
- I Corinthians 16:1-4—we see that there was a contribution being collected at Corinth, the capital of Achaia, for the Christians of Jerusalem.

- II Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:2—we find the churches of Macedonia introduced as already engaged in a collection for this very purpose.
- “Thus all of the circumstances brought together in those two verses in Romans are corroborated by a number of other passages in the history of Acts and in the Corinthian epistles. And each of these, by some hint in the passage, or by the date of the writing in which the passage occurs, can be fixed at a particular time—a period toward the close of Paul’s second missionary journey.

Does this conformity, scattered and indirect, with not a whiff of verbal similarity, look like forgery on one part or on the other? Or rather, does each passage stand perfectly naturally in connection with its own context? If so, the suggestion that such a coincidence is the effect of design is most improbable.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 3](#))

- “The book of Acts and the Pauline epistles are verbally independent; their interconnections are indirect. That is what makes their harmonies so impressive as evidence that both give us substantially truthful representations of real events.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 3](#))

Pauline UC#4—Greet Prisca and Aquila

- “There are certain parts of Paul’s letters that we typically pass over in silence. The long lists of greetings, in particular, are flyover territory for expository preachers. “Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas...” The congregation is probably snoring already. And yet such passages can, on occasion, furnish us with beautiful examples of coincidence without design.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))
- Romans 16:3-4—“first, the fact that this greeting appears in the epistle to the *Romans* suggests that Prisca and Aquila are inhabitants of that city.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))
- Acts 18:2—so Priscilla and Aquila were originally inhabitants of Rome, perhaps recently returned once the expulsion under Claudius ceased to be enforced. This is one point of coincidence.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))
- Acts 18:3, 18—“again, from Acts 18, we find that Paul stayed with them (18:3), and when he left, they departed with him (18:18). From this, it would be a fair inference that they were fellow workers with him, though only Paul’s greeting in Romans makes this fact explicit.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))
- Acts 18:12-17—“third, Paul says that they “laid down their own necks” for his sake. How so? See Acts 18:12-17, where Paul is dragged before the Roman tribunal and Sosthenes is beaten by the mob. If Aquila and Prisca were Paul’s fellow workers Christ Jesus in Corinth, it is clear that they, too, were exposed to dangers.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))

- “Fourth, Paul indicates that the churches of the Gentiles give thanks for them. Given the themes of the entire letter, this singling out of the Gentiles seems to have more than ordinary significance. And going back to Acts 18:2, we find that Aquila was a Jew, expelled from Rome when the emperor Claudius, exasperated with riots in the Jewish quarter that had something to do with a fellow named “Chrestus” (a common Roman misspelling of “Christus”), decided to evict the Jews. Yet they were working with Paul, who in this very city declared that he was turning from the Jews to the Gentiles and from that time forward conducted a highly effective mission among them (18:5-11). So Prisca and Aquila, though Jews, took part in the ministry to the Gentiles. And that is how they earned the thanks of the Gentile churches.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))
- Romans 16:1—*why commend a servant of the church at Cenchrea?* Paul is writing, apparently, from Corinth. Perhaps Cenchrea is, then, in the neighborhood of Corinth.
- Acts 18:18—we find from the book of Acts that Paul himself, upon leaving Corinth, visited Cenchrea.
- “Thus the apparently barren lists of greetings furnish us with numerous points of indirect correspondence—consistency and even harmony, but without verbal borrowing—with the events in the historical narrative of Acts.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 4](#))

Pauline UC#5—The Life and Journeys of Timothy

- I Corinthians 4:17—Paul explains that he has sent Timothy unto the Corinthians. From that passage alone, however, we cannot tell whether he has sent him *before* the letter or *with* it, in which case the language of “sending” would be anticipation of the act.
- I Corinthians 16:10-11—makes it plain that Paul had sent Timothy before writing the letter, as he speaks of Timothy’s arrival as something independent from their receipt of the letter itself.
- “But the comparison of these two passages raises an interesting question. If Timothy had been sent first, why should he not arrive first? And if he arrived first, what use would it be to send, after the fact, instructions on how they were to receive him?”

The only plausible resolution is that Timothy, though sent first, must have taken some indirect route to Corinth. The fastest method of travel from Ephesus, where Paul was writing, to Corinth would be to take a ship; with a fair wind, the journey between these two cities on opposite sides of the archipelago can be made in a very short time.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 6](#))

- Acts 19:21-22—“we discover that Timothy, when he left Ephesus, took the land route, and went up through Macedonia. Here once again we have the characteristic of undesigned coincidences that neither the historical account nor the letters could plausibly be said to have been written up from the other. The letter does not mention Timothy’s journey through Macedonia at all; the book

of Acts does not mention Paul's letter. But what we find in the book of Acts is the only plausible way of reconciling those stray comments Paul makes in the letter." (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 6](#))

- "It is not always so in historical work. Jortin's *Life of Erasmus*, for example, is framed almost entirely from Erasmus's letters, and for just that reason it gives us virtually nothing that cannot be found in the letters themselves. There is much parallel material between the letters and Jortin's biography, but there is no *interlocking*. The coincidences do not qualify as *undesigned*." (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 6](#))
- II Timothy 3:15—clearly, this is a reference to the Jewish scriptures; but Paul gives no clue as to how Timothy, who was not circumcised until after his conversion as a young man (Acts 16:3), had acquired such knowledge.
- Acts 16:1—his mother made sure he was instructed in the scriptures of her people.

Pauline UC#6—Acts Was Not Written by Someone Copying Paul's Letters

- "A life as rich in travel and relationships as Paul's was, documented both by his letters and by the history of the book of Acts, affords many opportunities for undesigned coincidences to emerge—so many, in fact, that it is worth pausing to see some of the evidence that Acts was not written by someone who had Paul's letters before him.

Leafing through II Corinthians, we notice how conspicuous a part is played by Titus. He is named multiple times (see chapters 7 and 8 in particular), and Paul describes him in II Corinthians 8:23 as "my partner and fellow helper concerning you." Yet in the book of Acts, his name does not appear even once. It would be a poor fabricator who could not make more of his material than this. Yet in real historical documents, the omission of some person or event that we could hardly imagine ourselves omitting is quite common.

Or consider Paul's enumeration of his sufferings in II Corinthians 11:24-25. "Thrice was I beaten with rods"—but only one of those occasions makes it into the history (Acts 16:22). "Thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day I have been in the deep"—what an opportunity to tell a set of dramatic tales! Yet not one of these three is mentioned in the book of Acts, where the one disastrous voyage that is recounted (Acts 27) takes place years after this letter was penned.

Or compare the account Paul gives of his escape from Damascus in II Corinthians 11:32-33 with the account of the same adventure in Acts 9:23-25. The main facts are the same, but the differences make it perfectly clear that the history was not written up from the letter. In II Corinthians, for example, Paul says that Aretas had the city guarded, though there is no information as to who did the guarding. In Acts, it we are told that the Jews kept watch at the gates for Paul, for which they probably needed the leave of the ethnarch; yet Aretas goes unnamed. True, it is not hard to reconcile these statements. *Qui facit per alium, facit per se*, as the

saying goes: he who does a thing by another does it himself. But here again, it is not credible to suggest that the author of Acts wrote his history from the letter.

This same manifest independence is visible in I Corinthians as well. Consider all of the problems that the church at Corinth had written about, problems to which Paul replies in 1 Corinthians 7 and 8: problems about marriage, about calling, about the unmarried, about food offered to idols. It is wholly natural that they should make these inquiries of Paul and wholly natural that he should reply to them. Yet in the book of Acts we find no trace of these problems at Corinth, and the one place that the question of food offered to idols is touched upon, the Jerusalem council arguably enjoins something stricter than Paul himself, writing later than that event, imposes (Acts 15:20).

All of these passages provide evidence that the history was written independently of these letters. The numerous coincidences between them, some of which we have already seen in this series and some of which we will be looking at in subsequent installments, are therefore genuinely undesigned. And that is why they provide evidence of their substantial trustworthiness.

One more touch of verisimilitude in 1 Corinthians itself, noted by Paley in his *Horae Paulinae*, though not really an undesigned coincidence, deserves attention. Paul begins chapter 7 with a reference to earlier correspondence now lost: “Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me. . .”

The issues they have raised, however foreign to us, are the sorts of things we can well imagine arising in a young church of the time. But other parts of the letter reveal that there were graver and more embarrassing problems that they had not written about but that Paul had evidently learned of from other sources: bitter quarreling and divisions (1:11, 11:18), sexual immorality (5:1), and lawsuits between members of the church (6:1). What is more natural or probable than that their letter to Paul should speak of the issues that did not reflect poorly on any of them, while rumor carried to Paul’s ears (“It is commonly reported . . .” 5:1) an account of the more scandalous matters? This manner of dividing the issues Paul addresses would be most improbable in a forgery. It has the ring of truth.” (McGrew, [Undesigned Coincidences: Part 5](#))

Conclusion

- Please recall from Lesson 21 last week that *UC* demonstrate the reliability of the Bible and demonstrate the following:
 - 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.
- 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

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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](#)
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