

## John Dickson (Studio)

Christianity is tangible. Historical. You can read it, sure. But you can also see it. Touch it.

We're going around the world in this episode, to take a look at some of the objects that represent the different chapters in the story of Christianity.

From a small, now almost indistinct piece of graffiti on an ancient Roman wall, to a stunning illuminated manuscript hidden in a Viking-age medieval Irish monastery. From the Bible translation without which some claim we wouldn't have Shakespeare, to the world's largest bronze statue shedding light on how stupid some Christians are!! Wait for that one!!

We have 12 objects to give an overview of some of the good - and not so good - of Christian history.

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

**John Dickson:** Hey Tim, cool idea, or should I just say epic idea. Um, how did it come to you?

**Tim Challies:** yeah, it came to me when I was studying church history and realizing there's a big gap between what we can read about in books and what we can actually see.

## **John Dickson (Studio)**

That's Tim Challies, a Canadian author and pastor who was blogging well before it was a thing - for 20 years this year, actually. We're talking to him today about his book and documentary *Epic: An Around the World Journey through Christian History*. Our friends at Zondervan have made it into a MasterLecture, too, so you can see the artifacts and watch as Tim travels and talks to experts about them. You can get 50% off their full suite of videos including Tim's at [zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions](http://zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions) and use the code UNDECEPTIONS50.

**Tim Challies:** That's especially true when you're in a place like Canada, or perhaps Australia, where the Christian history is very, very recent. And you're reading about all these remarkable places and remarkable things and thinking, man, I'd really like to see them.

And so I got it in my mind, I would like to go and see. church history.

**John Dickson:** Um, you had some rules though. You didn't want to go to monuments that just marked, you know, great figures and whatever. Uh, nor just places. You wanted artifacts. Is there, is there a historian locked inside that pastor's heart?

**Tim Challies:** I did study history back in my college days, my university days. I've always loved history. And, um, so there was definitely some appeal there just to study history as it was. But the idea of objects came to me at that time, there were quite a lot of books being written or videos being done about historical objects, but nobody had really explored it in the Christian space yet.

Um, as is often the case, you see things out in the general market and Christians see it too and, and adapt it for our much smaller market. Uh, but there's something about objects that are, well, just so tangible. They're just so there. So it's one thing to stand in a place and say, this person used to stand here.

If you've been to Jerusalem or something, there's something neat about walking the streets of Jerusalem and saying, Hey, Jesus once walked these streets. That's neat. But there's something really neat about

holding an object and saying, this person in history held this object, or here's the significance of this object.

There are things you can see, there's things that really bring, uh, they bridge the past and the present.

**John Dickson:** Yeah, I just was teaching a class at Wheaton College yesterday about Emperor Julian, the pagan Emperor Julian. And I have a coin of Julian's and of course was able to pass it around the class. And there is something amazing to think, you know, this is a real point in the history of the world. These events were as tangible As this artifact still is in my hands today.

### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Up first: we're heading to my happy place: not Balmoral Beach or Perisher ski slopes! ...The other one: Ancient Rome.

**FACT FILE 1:** The Augustus Prima Porta

**LOCATION:** Vatican Museum, Vatican City

**TYPE:** Work of art

**DATE:** 1st Century AD

**INTERESTING FACT:** Prima Porta or 'First Gate' was a town a few kilometres outside of the ancient city of Rome. The town had a Roman aqueduct, which gave travellers their first indication of having reached Rome. The statue was found in Prima Porta, within the grounds of the Villa of Livia, the wife of Augustus.

### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Gaius Octavius Thurinus was the great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. In 27 BC, the Roman Senate acclaimed him Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus, which basically translates as "Commander/Emperor, son of the god Julius Caesar, his Majesty" - something like that, anyway.

Octavian was the first Roman emperor.

The Augustus Prima Porta statue shows the emperor in an elaborately decorated 'cuirass' - which is a piece of armour that covers the torso, a breast plate and back plate fastened together. His cloak is wrapped around his hips and Augustus has his arm raised as if addressing a crowd. This is the image I show of him in all my lectures that mention him.

He is barefoot, sort of a sign of divinity.

And Augustus himself was not only the *son of a god* (*Julias Caesar*), but a god in his own right, after his death in AD 14. So the denarius I wear around my neck. A denarius of Tiberius, Augustus' stepson and heir, calls Tiberius *divi filius*, son of a god, because now his dad Augustus has been elevated to divine status.

**Tim Challies:** Sure. So, an interesting thing about the, the statue of Caesar Augustus is that it took me three tries to actually see it. Um, it being Italy, sometimes things are just. It's inexplicably closed. Um, at least that's what my Italian guide told me. You just never know. Things will be closed. No reason. Eventually we got into that part of the Vatican Museums and saw this statue of Augustus.

The statue is called Augustus of Prima Porta. And it stands in in this book as an object that represents the world into which the New Testament is built. came, in which the church was, was birthed. Of course, Augustus was the one who helped establish the Pax Romana that gave [00:03:30] the context in which Christianity could spread and thrive.

**John Dickson (Studio)**

*Pax Romana* is the 'Roman peace' - it describes the period of civil wars (Antony, Cleopatra, Brutus, Cassius and all that) which resulted in the assassination of Julius Caesar. Augustus brought a crushing peace compared to the civil war period. And in that peace, poets flourished, roads were built, external wars were won, and the empire became the uncontested super power of the world for the next 200 years.

**Tim Challies:** Um, even, you know, before the big waves of persecution came, the groundwork had been laid through which missionaries could travel through the Roman Empire, um, across the roads and, um, with the army sort of holding back the boundaries of the empire.

## **FACT FILE 2: The Pilate Stone**

**LOCATION:** Israel Museum, Jerusalem

**TYPE:** Architecture, hard limestone

**DATE:** AD 26–36

**INTERESTING FACT:** Up until five years ago, the Pilate Stone was the only object from his time to bear the name 'Pontius Pilate'. In 2018, Israeli archaeologists released new findings from a 1960s excavation, saying

they believe they have found a ring with the inscription 'Pilate' from the early 1st century. But this has been questioned by other scholars. So the Pilate Stone is likely still the only piece of physical evidence we have for Pontius Pilate! Check out the link in the show notes for more on that most recent find.

**Tim Challies:** So, um, for ages now there have been historians, or there were historians, who disputed that this guy, Pontius Pilate, had ever actually lived. He had actually existed. And, uh, it became sort of assumed after some time that, no, he was not a real figure. He was it's fabricated for the Bible until one day somebody was doing some excavations and overturned a stone that had his name on it.

And like so much else we read in the Bible, eventually the record catches up and we see these clear evidences that the Bible is referring to real people in real places. It's real history.

### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Yep, it's real history. I've played with this Pilate Stone in Jerusalem. It was discovered by fluke - as so often happens - on the coast of Israel, just north of Tel Aviv in the ancient town of Caesarea Maritima.



We had literary texts from antiquity that mentioned Pilate - Philo, Josephus, Tacitus, and the New Testament, but this was the first archaeological evidence.

And it resolved a little dispute.

The Gospels call Pilate the hegamon of Judea, the prefect or governor. The great Roman historian Tacitus calls him the 'procurator' of Judaea, which is a slightly different Roman title. Tacitus writes, "Christus ... suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate."

This stone, which was set up by Pilate himself, calls him prefect. In this instance, the Gospels are closer to the fine details than the greatest Roman source of the ancient world.

And now for one of my favourite items of the ancient world ...

### **FACT FILE 3: The Alexamenos Graffito**

**LOCATION:** Palatine Museum, Rome

**TYPE:** Inscription in plaster.

**DATE:** Approximately AD 200

**INTERESTING FACT:** This piece of graffiti is the earliest surviving depiction of Jesus hanging on a cross.

**John Dickson:** Um, but Very much contrasting, uh, Augustus and Pilate, two powerful figures, is the gorgeous little, uh, Alexomenos, uh, piece of graffiti, uh, on Palatine Hill. Um, it is special, I know it took you a couple of times to see that as well, uh, but tell us about that, because some people have never heard of this.

**Tim Challies:** Yeah, it is just such a neat little artifact. You can see it there on the Palatine Hill and it is the first known visual portrayal of Jesus, um, until, until this was the first time anybody had, as far as we know, had jotted down a picture of Jesus. What is that picture? It's a picture of. There's something on a cross, a human like figure on a cross, and yet the figure is of a donkey, and there's this man bowing down to this donkey on the cross, and the inscription says Alex, Aleximenos, is worshiping his God.

And uh, what an amazing thing that the first portrayal of Jesus Christ is one mocking Christians and mocking Jesus.

## John Dickson (Studio)

The graffiti is a fantastic example of the mockery the early Christians would have faced. The shame of a death on a cross is sometimes lost these days. One of our guests from last season in our episode on The Crucifixion, Reverard Fleming Rutledge called it “the most degrading, dehumanising form of death”. So the idea of *worshipping* someone who had died like that ... well, it was ridiculous.

**Tim Challies:** And to think about artistic representations of Jesus in our day. Very likely, they're going to be mocking depictions of Jesus. So, so little has changed between then and now. And it just shows that at the time Christianity was birthed into the world, already people were turning against Christ, denying Him, and mocking those who follow Him.

**John Dickson:** Um, picture of the, the shame of the cross, the upside downness of Christianity, uh, and eventually Christianity would turn the Roman world upside down, uh, and, and we would be valuing humility. In a way that the ancients, uh, never, never did.

## **FACT FILE 4: Dogmatic Sarcophagus**

**LOCATION:** The Vatican Museum, Vatican City

**TYPE:** A sculptural stone coffin.

**DATE:** Approximately AD 340

**INTERESTING FACT:** It is suggested that the first depiction of the 'Trinity' - the Christian doctrine of the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is sculpted into the sarcophagus.

**Tim Challies:** Dogmatic Sarcophagus, which I think sounds like an amazing name for like a metal band or something. It's actually a box from the 4th century that has the first known representation of the Trinity on it. And so it's a visual representation, of course we don't Uh, we know the Trinity can't really be portrayed, but here's one person's attempt to display the Trinity in artistic form.

And, uh, yeah, it's another artifact that's there in the Vatican Museums to see at all times, except the first two times I showed up. It was, just happened to be blocked, but eventually I caught a glimpse of it and had to content myself with that.

**John Dickson:** On the, uh, on the third attempt. There's something Trinitarian

**Tim Challies:** attempt, yeah, and you know, this, that thing, and if we're thinking about what these objects represent, um, that was the idea, every object would represent some part in Christian history, then something like this represents the, the creedal times, it represents the Arian controversy, it represents even today, all those who deny the Trinity, et cetera.

**John Dickson:** Yeah. And it's, um, first half of the fourth century, right? So we're really right in the thick of those, um, those debates.

### **John Dickson (Studio)**

The sarcophagus is called the 'dogmatic' sarcophagus because it seems to reflect the 'dogma' or the principles laid down by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

This was a really important council, attempting to put to bed some of the divisions that had erupted in the church, including what Tim calls the 'Arian controversy'.

The Arians claimed that Jesus was not fully God. He was like the bridge between humanity and God - a

midway point that allowed finite creatures to reach the infinite.

It was a cool idea, from the perspective of Greek philosophy, but it ran against the traditional view of Christians that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were co-equal and co-eternal.

It was a dispute that could have torn Christianity apart, except that Emperor Constantine locked a few hundred bishops in a room for 8 weeks in the city of Nicaea and demanded they resolve the issue. Constantine didn't care what they all decided (it was all a bit too philosophical for him). He just wanted unity.

At the end of it, Arius lost the debate, and the council agreed on a 175-word summary statement called the Nicene Creed.

It's a statement agreed upon by all Christians - Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant - right up to today.

## ***READING***

*We believe in one God,*

*The Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth*

*Of all things visible and invisible,  
And in one Lord Jesus christ, the only son of God  
Begotten from the Father before all ages,  
God from God  
Light from Light  
True God from true God,  
Begotten, not made;  
Of the same essence as the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
He came down from heaven;  
He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin  
Mary ...*

## FILM EXCERPT - [The Secret of Kells](#)

### **John Dickson (studio)**

That's a clip from the trailer for the 2009 animated film *The Secret of Kells*, which was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature that year.

It incorporates references to both Celtic myth and medieval manuscripts. It's also family-friendly, so for those Undeceptions listeners who want to pass on their history love to their kids, this could be one to check out!

It's about the treasured Book of Kells and a brave Irish boy who takes it upon himself to protect the priceless work from Viking raiders.

It's our next object ...

### **FACT FILE 5: Book of Kells**

**LOCATION:** Trinity College, Dublin

**TYPE:** Illuminated manuscript.

**DATE:** Around 6-8th century AD



**INTERESTING FACT:** The Book of Kells was an ambitious undertaking. It's estimated that the skins of 185 calves were needed for the project, to produce the vellum it was written on.

**John Dickson:** I'm completely jealous you've played with the book of Kells. Oh my goodness, Tim. Um, so for those who don't know the book of Kells, we are zipping forward, uh, three and a half centuries.

Uh, tell us what the book of Kells is and what you reckon it tells us. About Christianity and its movement.

**Tim Challies:** Sure, to see the Book of Kells, you've got to go to Ireland, which I recommend anyways. Amazing artifact. Okay. I didn't get to play with it. It is under the strictest security of almost anything I saw. Um, you may not take pictures of it. You may not really spend too much time with it. They, they guard it heavily, but it stands in for that era when the Bible is being transmitted through these.

Delightful illuminated manuscripts. And here we see the transmission of scripture in that monastic era when it was really being carried on through the, the many monasteries we see. The, the spread of Christianity into the British Isles and, um, you know, starting to be

embedded there in the, uh, the monasteries along, especially along the coast.

**John Dickson:** Gospels, isn't it? The four, the

**Tim Challies:** Correct? Yeah.

**John Dickson:** And um, tell us something about the illuminations that go with it. I mean, why are they making it pretty? As well as just words. Yeah, and

**Tim Challies:** it really is. It is stunning. It is beautiful. Um, the colors, everything has, has lasted so well. So it's just a beautiful thing to look at, but it shows us how highly they valued scripture. And, you know, we're used today. I can, I could. If I wanted to, I could copy and paste the Bible, I could, we have myriad printings of it, etc.

We have no shortage of Scripture, Gospels. Um, but in that time, it was very rare and very difficult to transmit. So here we see people who are dedicating their whole lifetime to painstakingly copying it out and then showing the value of the book, the value of the Bible by making it beautiful, by illumining it.

As they did. So it's, it's really a, it's the Bible, but it's also a work of, of just the highest art.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

The Book of Kells is one of medieval Europe's greatest treasures, full of ornate and intricate illustrations. It's believed that monks on the remote Scottish island of Iona created the book.

The island of Iona, and its monastery, came under attack from Vikings in 806. The raid left 68 people dead, and the monks sought refuge at a newly-founded monastery in Kells in County Meath in Ireland, probably taking the Book of Kells with them and finishing it there.

If you want to hear more about the Viking raids in this part of the world, including the earlier one in 793 on Lindisfarne, head to perhaps my funnest Undeceptions episodes to make - episodes 65-66, The Vikings I and II.

For something so old, the Book of Kells is incredibly intact. 60 or so pages are missing, but over 600 pages remain. It's handwritten in beautiful Latin script, even if

some letters and whole words are missing. It's more a visual book than a perfect literary copy of the Gospels.

**John Dickson:** It's in Latin, the Book of Kells is in Latin, of course, um, and, and you make a good point along the way in your book that I think is sometimes lost, that, um, Latin sort of starts out as the common language, um, like they, they, they weren't putting this in Latin because they wanted to keep it from the people.

It was because this is the vulgar language, right? The common, the common language. Uh, but of course, over time, as you also acknowledge, uh, Latin does become an elite language and local languages are, you know, people who speak local languages are unable to access for themselves the truth. And that brings us to the wonderful Tyndale New Testament, because here, here's a story.

Trying to remedy that problem. In, in some ways, trying to replicate what the first Latin translation was doing. So Jerome and these buddies who, who gave us the Latin translation were trying to get this, uh, Bible in weird languages, Hebrew and Greek, into the common

language of the Western Roman Empire. Um, and Tyndale tried to do something similar.

## **READING**

*The British Library is to pay 1 million pounds for a copy of William Tyndale's 1526 translation of the New Testament into English. Dr Brian Lang, chief executive of the British Library, said yesterday he could not think of 'any printed book in the English language that has more significance than this'.*

## **FACT FILE 6: Tyndale New Testament**

**LOCATION:** British Library, London

**TYPE:** Book

**DATE:** 1526

**INTERESTING FACT:** 3000 copies of Tyndale's New Testament were originally printed at Worms in Germany. Today, only three remain.

**Tim Challies:** Yeah. Well, um, the, you're right that over time the Bible became associated with the elite rather than the commoner. And, um, that meant that it really

passed from the knowledge of the people, you know, they, they could only access it through the priesthood. Which then gave the priesthood way too much prominence, more than they should have.

Um, and so Tyndale and, you know, Wycliffe as well, um, before him, they were really engaged in taking the Bible back into the common tongue so that even the plow boy, as, uh, Tyndale, uh, famously said, even the plow boy would be able to read the word of God. And they, they did manage to translate scripture.

They did it at the cost of, well, Tyndale, especially the cost of his own life. And, uh, what a blessing that, uh, that they did that, that they accomplished that. And of course, Tyndale is regarded as the, um, the author of English language, or one of the, uh, the real, uh, systematizers of the English language. And so much of the, the words of Christian vocabulary we take for granted today.

It was really coined by him, uh, in, in a work of just incredible enduring importance.

## John Dickson (studio)

I reckon there's a whole episode in William Tyndale and the impact of the English Bible. Tyndale is the second-most quoted writer in English, second only to William Shakespeare. And some scholars have gone so far as to say 'Without Tyndale, no Shakespeare!'

Big call!

William Tyndale translated the Bible into English, shunning a century-old law that banned translating the Latin Bible into English. The church used St Jerome's Latin translation called The Vulgate. In England, most people now speak English. But clerics claimed that a widespread familiarity with God's word in the common English tongue would breed irreverence and cause confusion. They were snobs about the English language itself. They weren't sure English could convey the power of Jerome's Latin. And there was no doubt a bit of a control freak thing going on. They didn't want people reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Who knows what funny ideas might emerge!!

When word got out that Tyndale was translating the Bible into English, he had to flee England. He went to Germany, where the Reformation was well underway, and the Tyndale Bible was printed there, in Worms close to where Martin Luther was at the time.

Copies of the English Bible were smuggled into England in bales of cloth. Thousands of Bibles were distributed this way, despite it being a banned book.

Tyndale was eventually captured in (what is today) Belgium, and he was declared a heretic. In October 1536, he was tied to a stake and strangled to death. His body was then burned to ash - to erase his presence from the earth.

But his translation lived on.

And the Tyndale translation lies behind some stock Bible-inspired phrases like “let there be light”, “signs of the times”, “where two or three are gathered together” and “seek and ye shall find” and so on.

And, yes, the King James Bible, two centuries later, relied heavily on Tyndale’s translation.



## **FACT FILE 7: Triumph of Faith over Heresy**

**LOCATION:** Mother Church of the Jesuit Order, Chiesa del Gesù, Rome

**TYPE:** sculpture by Pierre Legros the Younger

**DATE:** Late 17th Century

**INTERESTING FACT:** The sculpture is well-known as a piece of Catholic propaganda during the counter-reformation, launched to combat the growing Protestant movement and reform the Catholic church after a period of great corruption. In the bottom corner of the sculpture, an impish angel gleefully rips the pages out of a book by Martin Luther.

**John Dickson:** This brings us to the Reformation, uh, because of course, you know, that, that, that impulse to bring Christianity to the masses, bypassing the priesthood, as it were, is a Protestant, um, dream. Um, now at Undeceptions, we've just done an enormous double episode on the Reformation. So I'm going to, we're going to be very choosy here.

I'm going to let you choose one out of artifact out of the many. that deal with the Protestant Reformation. Okay.

So you can choose one out of the following. Ready? The Gutenberg Bible, the indulgence box, John Calvin's chair. Um, uh, and maybe the sculpture known as the triumph of faith over heresy. So Tim Challies, I'm letting you choose.

**Tim Challies:** All right, so let me just say, there's some pre precursor to the Reformation objects, and that would be, you know, Jan Hus cell door, and even the Gutenberg Bible. Those lead to the Reformation, Erasmus New Testament, and so on. So we'll set those aside. I think the best Reformation era object, just because it's so evocative, is that sculpture, the Triumph of Faith over Heresy.

I've seen it a few times now, and it really is just something to behold. And almost every time I've looked at it, I've picked up on something else, but here is a sculpture that really represents the counter reformation. And so as the reformation swept over Europe, the Roman Catholic church responded through the Jesuit order.

And here's this sculpture that shows what they say would be the church triumphing over the heresy of these Protestants. And, uh, so you see a woman who's

either Mary or the church or both throwing these people into hell. And, um, you know, casting them into hell. And as you look closely, you start to see details.

You think that man maybe looks a little familiar, but You know, they didn't have photographs of those men as we do today. But you look at the books that are falling with them and you start to see it. There's Luther's name and there's Calvin's name. And here, here she is throwing these, um, reformers into hell.

And it just so wonderfully represents the counter reformation as the Catholic church attempted to, uh, to stop the gains that Protestants had made.

## **FACT FILE 8: The Fleet Bible**

**LOCATION:** Sydney, Australia

**TYPE:** Book

**DATE:** Date of printing is unclear, as the title page was lost in fire. But the Prayer Book that accompanied the Bible was printed in 1784.

**INTERESTING FACT:** The Fleet Bible is a rather plain copy of the King James Bible, brought from England on

the First Fleet to Australia by chaplain Richard Johnson. He used the Bible and the accompanying Book of Common Prayer to conduct the first church service in Australia on Sunday Feb 3rd, 1788, under a large tree near the shore of Sydney Cove.

The Bible is signed by every member of the royal family to have visited Sydney since the early 1900s.

**John Dickson:** I can't resist, uh, taking us to Sydney. I mean, well played on that, Tim. Well

**Tim Challies:** Yeah. Nice. One of my favorite places.

**John Dickson:** Good. Not many people would place Sydney on the great map of Christian artifacts, so tell us what, why you went to Sydney and what you got to play with.

**Tim Challies:** Okay, so we went to Sydney in part because we wanted to get to every continent, so, you know, we had to go to, we had to go there as well. Um, but what we thought would really be useful there was thinking about the First Fleet, thinking about the, um, Thinking about the fact that Australia really was founded, in large part, as a Christian nation, or with Christians right at the forefront.

And so we, uh, wanted to consider the, you know, the founders, consider the work they had done, and consider how Australia, right from the get go, was regarded as Christian. And so, um, yeah, we looked at the, the Bible that had been, um, in hand, right when the first fleet landed, you would know more about, The people and the, uh, the origin story there.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

One of the best books to read about the history of the Bible in Australia, by the way, is by Aussie historian Dr Meredith Lake, called *The Bible in Australia: A cultural history*.

Dr Lake skilfully lays out the huge influence the Christian Bible has had on Australia. She dispells two persistent myths: 1. That Australia is a straight-forward Christian nation (or *was*), and 2. That Australia is a doggedly secular or post-Christian society.

It's a far more complex story! As is the story of British colonization of my beloved country, and especially its treatment of First Nations people. For more on that, check out episode 37, *Racist Church*.

**John Dickson:** So did you look at several pages of that First Fleet Bible? Uh, yeah, there's, there's some lovely stains along the way. So like where, where the communion wine has obviously been dropped, you know, right into Matthew 26 or

**Tim Challies:** Right. Yeah. Yeah. It is a well worn Bible. And what fascinated me, I don't even know if I should say this was it wasn't locked in a museum. It was, I didn't see exactly where it was taken from, but it's just in a cupboard or something, isn't it? I

**John Dickson:** Well, no, he, he, uh, my good mate, um, Justin Moffat, uh, whose wife Laurel actually conducts, uh, hosts, uh, uh, a podcast for Our Undeceptions, um, but he, um, he actually would have got it out for you knowing you were coming, but it actually lives in a little dungeon behind a cage.

**Tim Challies:** Okay. That's what I assumed. Yeah. Somewhere in the back.

**John Dickson:** yeah, just fair warning to any thieves that are thinking of robbing the church. Um,

**Tim Challies:** there's much of a resale market for artifacts like that anyways, but you never know.

**John Dickson:** Ooh, I tell you, I'd like that one. Um, in fact, right opposite me, Tim, uh, I won't jump from the microphone and grab it, but I, I have a photograph that Justin let me take of my favourite prayer from the prayer book that came with the same Richard Johnson right, you know, right alongside that First Fleet Bible. Um, and now I've got it framed right opposite me. But, um,

## **READING**

*"O Lord, our heavenly Father, Almighty and everlasting God, who hast safely brought us to the beginning of this day; Defend us in the same with thy mighty power; and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance, to do always that is righteous in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*

## **FACT FILE 9: Amy Carmichael's Plaques**

**LOCATION:** Dohnavur, 30 miles from the southern tip of India

**TYPE:** Painted wooden plaques

**DATE:** Mid 20th century

**INTERESTING FACT:** After a severe injury in 1931, Amy Carmichael was confined to her room almost entirely for the last 20 years of her life. The plaques of simple, short Bible quotes, that were placed around her room were a source of constant encouragement to her.

**John Dickson:** Right. I'm going to, I'm going to quote, quote you here. Uh, of all the historical characters I encountered in my round the world journey, none of them blessed me more at a personal level than Amy Carmichael. Now, most of my listeners won't have heard of Amy Carmichael. So who's that and what's the artifact and why is it such a

**Tim Challies:** So, a number of reasons she's such a big deal. But for me, it was, we went to Ireland, which is where she was born, and where she became a believer, and where she felt called to, um, mission work. And then we went to India, which is where she went up. She had, uh, where she ended up. She had hoped to go to Japan.

That didn't work out. And so she, uh, reset herself and ended up in India where she founded a ministry that would take in orphans, especially orphan girls who had, uh, had been handed over to the sex trade there, um, to



some sort of temple prostitution. And she would essentially raise these children as her own.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Amy Carmichael moved to India from Ireland at the age of 27 and never returned. It was 1895, and she arrived with dengue fever. Despite some missionaries suggesting she wouldn't be able to stay the course, Amy lasted 55 years.

Early, Amy learned of the trafficking of little girls for prostitution in Hindu temples, an ancient practice that has now - mercifully - been outlawed.

Young girls as young as seven years old would be dedicated to a particular god or goddess and perform favours, with the income used as a religious offering.

Amy dedicated herself to helping these children, bringing them out of servitude and offering them Christ's compassion - a place to sleep, to learn, and be loved in safety. The Dohnavur [don-a-ver] Fellowship was the orphanage she founded in 1927, and it remains open and active as a refuge for girls to this day.

Amy had a series of simple wooden plaques made to hang in her living quarters.

One was engraved with just the words, “I know”. Another with the words “Fear not”. They’re references to a passage from the Book of Revelation, meant to remind her that God knows and understands the pain we feel, and that we needn’t fear because Christ has conquered death.

Here’s a poem she wrote about those words, which were a profound comfort to her after a devastating fall that left her room-bound for the final 20 years of her life.

## READING

*“I know”: the words contain*

*Unfathomable comfort for our pain.*

*How they can hold such depths I do*

*not know-*

*I only know that it is so.*

*“Fear not”: the words have power*

*To give the thing they name; for in an hour*

*Of utter weariness, the soul, aware of One*

*beside her bed,*

*Is comforted.*

*O Lord most dear,*

*I thank Thee, and I worship-*

*Thou art here.*

**Tim Challies:** Um, we went to Donover Fellowship, which is the orphanage, the organization she set up there and found that it. It still exists, and that it's still serving the Lord, it's still doing well. And what was really neat was we met one elderly lady there, who is actually one of the very last orphans who was brought in and handed to Amy Carmichael, who would pray for her and give her a name.

And, um, wow, that was just a really neat bridge. We're talking historical artifacts, but here's a person who sort of spans from, um, That character in Christian history who, who did so much, suffered so deeply, loved so

well, honored the Lord, um, wrote songs and poems and, um, of course cared for all these children.

And then here's this woman who didn't know her. She was too young to know her, but who stands in there and represents her. And a friend of mine was just there a few weeks ago and says that woman's still, still going, still showing people around. And, uh, she's. Pretty elderly now, but she's still the last, I believe, of the orphans that, um, Carmichael herself brought in.

So, it was just a tremendous encouragement. So often when we visit older places, we find that perhaps theologically they've gone off the rails, or we find that there's nothing there anymore, that the organization came and went. Um, but it was just a huge blessing to see that organization doing well and still committed to, to what she was committed to.

So just these little things you pick up as you, as you travel around that really, really bless you, encourage you.

## **FACT FILE 10: The Slave Bible**

**LOCATION:** The Museum of the Bible, Washington D.C.

**TYPE:** Abridged version of the Bible. It's title was *Parts of the Holy Bible, selected for the use of the Negro Slaves, in the British West-India Islands.*

**DATE:** Published in 1807.

**INTERESTING FACT:** This abridged version of the Bible was used by British missionaries to convert and educate slaves. It excludes any portions that might inspire rebellion or thoughts of liberation. About 90 per cent of the Old Testament is missing, and about 50 per cent of the New Testament.

Passages like *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus*” from the Book of Galatians, chapter 3 do not appear.

**Tim Challies:** Christianity has done wonderful things for the world, of course, we acknowledge that, but Christians aren't above, well, taking advantage, or Christians aren't without blame, and there's of course people who masquerade as Christians and are not, and, um, as you search out Christian history, you do see sometimes you're not sure was that person truly a

believer or not, and sometimes it's very obvious that people were not.

So, you asked about the slave Bible. So you go back in American history and you find this era of slavery, and it was people who proclaimed themselves Christians who were enslaving other people who were often Christians. In order for those, slave masters to maintain their authority, their power, whatever it was.

Uh, they had to justify what they did from scripture and they had to make sure that they weren't, as they were, um, engaging with their slaves, that they weren't showing those slaves that they themselves were. That the slaveholders were wrong and so they would take the Bible and they would gut it of any parts that would counteract, um, the master slave relationship. The Bible. Because all the passages that somebody might read and say, Hey, this slavery thing is wrong. Um, those were taken out of it. So a fascinating, but also horrifying, um, artifact. And one that I think we all just need to ponder from time to time.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Again – one day we’ll do a whole episode or two on slavery and the Bible through history. We did a few singles on the topic back in 2020. We’ll link to them singles in the show notes. They’ll have to do for now.

From the distressing to the ridiculous ....

### **FACT FILE 11: Oral Roberts’s Praying Hands**

**LOCATION:** Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma

**TYPE:** Bronze sculpture

**DATE:** 1980

**INTERESTING FACT:** The sculpture is 60-foot-tall (just over 18 metres) and is known as the world’s largest praying hands. Tulsa actually claims it as the largest bronze sculpture in the world, period.

The second-largest giant praying hands statue is 32 feet high - in case anyone was wondering - and you can see that in Webb City, Missouri.

**Tim Challies:** Um, you know, slavery may not be something we're prone to justify, but there may be other things, other forms of evil that we may justify in order to maintain our own power, our own wealth, or whatever it is. I can take wealth and bridge then to the praying hands, um, at Oral Roberts University. Um, they just stand in as a sort of, as an artifact for the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel that, um, really Oral Roberts was so key to creating and to, um, popularizing around the world.

**John Dickson:** Some of my listeners won't know about the prosperity gospel. Um, a bunch of my listeners are, you know, skeptical about the whole Christianity thing and won't, won't know, uh, about that. So tell us about that and what was, what was the kind of theology that someone like Oral Roberts tried to, uh, give the world?

**Tim Challies:** Yeah. The prosperity gospel says all the future promises are, you know, we shouldn't worry about future promises. We should be able to have all the promises of God right now. And the promise they believe God is giving us right now is the promise of material wealth, i. e. Lots and lots of money. And, um, oral Roberts really, um, he was the one who, who.



In many ways, um, popularized that idea, and he was the one who came up with that evil, evil idea of seed faith, that if you plant a seed, so if you step out in faith and give Oral Roberts a hundred or a thousand dollars, God will then multiply that, and you'll somehow receive back tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, which we can shake our heads and say that is so Gross, so stupid, so, so wrong, and yet so many people are drawn into it, uh, in by it.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

I totally agree with Tim!

It's true Jesus preached that one day, in the kingdom of God, all things would be made well—sickness, sadness, and death would be overturned, and the entire creation, including our bodies, would be restored and glorified.

But any suggestion that we can claim that concrete flourishing now, in this fallen world, is about as far from what Jesus teaches in the Gospels as I can imagine!

Um, and there's so many people now who teach it. I mean, it's so obviously a scam, and, and yet, here it is. It's still carried on so often in the name of Jesus Christ,

which is what makes it not just wrong, but full out blasphemous.

## **FACT FILE 12: YouVersion Bible App**

**LOCATION:** Available everywhere.

**TYPE:** Free, online Bible

**DATE:** 2006

**INTERESTING FACT:** In 2023, the YouVersion Bible Apps are up to 742,700,000 downloads.

**John Dickson:** You end, um, with something that doesn't sound much like an artifact at all. Uh, the YouVersion Bible is an app, like you can't go to some, you know, 13th century monastery and, uh, and, and handle this. So what are you trying to convey by making this an object of Christian history?

### **Producer Kaley**

Honestly, when I heard John scoff at the notion that an app is an artifact, I thought he sounded like his snobby fictional hero, President Bartlett from the West Wing - just don't tell him I said that ....

**Tim Challies:** Yeah, I guess I was trying to be a little bit cheeky with it, but just to show that, um, really, if you want to summarize Christianity here in the 21st century, you may have to look at something virtual rather than an object that's tangible that you can have and hold. I mean, think about what we're doing here, um, miles apart, you and I, uh, from different nations, all of that, we've never met face to face, yet here we are.

Having this conversation, um, many of us are reading the Bible today, not in physical form, but through some sort of a glowing rectangle that we hold in our hands or have on the desk in front of us. And so, um, I think the, the Bible app, which is still the most prominent scripture reading app, kind of stands in as the object for our era, for our generation.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

John Dyer at Dallas Theological Seminary wrote a fascinating article for *Christianity Today* called *Bible Apps are the New Printing Press*. We'll link to it in the show notes.

*“As a new generation encounters the Bible for the first time, they will not experience it exclusively orally as in*

*the days before the printing press, or primarily in print as was the case for the past several centuries. Instead, for them, ‘the Bible’ will always be a multimedia category, and they will have more complex decisions to make about which combination of Bible media they want to use,” he writes.*

Yeah ... I don't know what I think of that!!!

Let's press PAUSE. I've got a five min Jesus for you.

All this talk of historical artifacts—especially the early ones related to Augustus, Pontius Pilate, and the ancient piece of graffiti—remind me of something strange about Christianity.

It is doggedly historical, even tangible.

Unlike other religions, Christianity gambles its plausibility on supposed historical events.

Christians don't just say otherworldly things like, God loves you, We all need forgiveness, and Heaven is open to all. None of that sort of thing is the least bit confirmable, or falsifiable. We may mock such spiritual claims, but we can't disconfirm them with counterevidence.

But that's not really how Christians talk. Listen closely, and you'll often hear them say things like, "Jesus was born during the reign of Emperor Augustus," "He grew up in the Galilean village of Nazareth", "He emerged from the circle of John the Baptist in the late 20s AD", or "He was executed by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate", and so on.

Statements like these are not immune from historical scrutiny. They 'touch' times, places, and people we know quite a bit about. They intersect with other figures (like Augustus, the Baptist, and Pilate) about whom we have reasonably good information.

The alleged events all took place in a cultural and political melting pot—Roman Galilee and Judaea—for which we have thousands of archaeological remains and hundreds of thousands of words of ancient inscriptions and written records.

When people proclaim an intangible thing like "God's love is universal", they are safe from scrutiny.

But as soon as they say "Our guy was crucified by the fifth governor of Judaea," they are stepping onto public ground—secular territory—and someone is bound to want to double-check.

As it turns out, an entire industry of ‘double-checking’ has developed over the last 250 years. The study of Jesus is a huge sub-discipline of history today.

Adherents of other Faiths don’t bear this burden. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—to take the next three largest religions—don’t risk their credibility making historical claims. Hinduism’s rituals and philosophy don’t invite historical investigation, for the simple reason that the central Hindu Scriptures—the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, and so on—don’t make historical pronouncements.

It’s the same with Buddhism. Its central claims can’t be attacked with this-worldly evidence. How could we even begin to disprove the Buddha’s vision “of all there is to be known” (as a text in the Tripitaka puts it) while meditating under a Bodhi tree one day in May? What historical or empirical test could be devised to critique his teaching that the karma of this life attaches itself to one’s rebirth?

The core content of Islam, too, includes nothing testable. The key Islamic ideas are: the oneness of God, predestination, angels, the obligation to pray and fast, and so on.

The history of Islamic expansion can be studied as a proper subject of history, as with Hinduism and Buddhism, but the faith-claims themselves are beyond historical reach.

I have often imagined it would feel 'safe' to be a devout Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim in today's sceptical West. It would be comforting to know that your core beliefs won't be the subject of a critical examination in a History Channel documentary, or reassessed every year, like clockwork, in the Opinion pieces each Diwali, Bodhi Day, or Ramadan, the way the 'hidden history of Jesus' seems to turn up in the press every Christmas and Easter.

For better or worse, Christianity's central claims are historical. The form of the New Testament documents is recognizably historical. The Gospels clearly present themselves as historical biographies of a famous life. The letters follow precisely the epistolary conventions of other occasional letters from the period, complete with traceable itineraries and lists of greetings to concrete individuals.

The core content of the New Testament is also plainly historical. There is, of course, plenty of theological talk

about 'the kingdom of God', of being 'justified by faith', and of 'entering eternal life', but all these things are premised on the tangible events of Jesus' life, deeds, teaching, death by crucifixion, and resurrection—all of which come from eyewitnesses.

Christianity goes out on a 'historical limb', and invites anyone who wishes to come and take a swing and cut the branch off!

In an odd way, then, the barrage of historical criticism directed at the Bible, and the life of Jesus, in particular, isn't just reasonable; it's a kind of compliment. It's a sign that critics understand well the form and content of the Christian faith. Christianity is tangible, historical.

You can press PLAY now.

**John Dickson:** Tim, what did you personally gain from this epic adventure, apart from, uh, lots of flying miles? Um,

**Tim Challies:** these objects and see God has worked fully around the globe. Of course, there are some unreached pockets of the world still, but almost anywhere you go, you can find some evidence of God's work there historically.



Um, It also, I think what it gave me even more than that, though, it was, it was bumping into Christians, spending time with Christians who are the true artifacts, right? All these objects don't mean anything compared to God's saving souls and God's church existing there in that country and there in that country.

Um, that gave me a real hunger to travel the world. To visit churches, which is actually what I've been doing this year as a kind of follow up project, worshiping in local churches around the world. So I've seen the history. Now I'm going back around the world to worship with the people who have been so impacted by the history or have come to Christ because of that history.

And so in some way, you know, you're downstream of that first fleet Bible, you know, that object that. Brought the gospel there to that part of the world. Um, but recently I went to Australia and I worshiped with the local church there. And that was a whole different experience, but, uh, I'd say a complimentary one.

**John Dickson:** skeptical listeners might be thinking that the, the story you tell. Uh, in this book is really just the story of a culturally domineering movement. You know,

it's made its mark everywhere because it's a bully. What might you say in reply?

**Tim Challies:** made its mark everywhere because it's a bully. There have been some places where Christianity has come as a culturally dominant force. And, you know, Australia would, would be an example where it was Christians who are at the forefront of, of founding the nation. And, um, You know, bringing people over from the, the British world.

Uh, but there's other places where Christianity went as a small player or as an underground movement, um, just recently as in North Africa and there. Uh, I think the biggest church you would find comprised of the people from that country, not expat churches would be maybe 15 people, and there might be a few hundred of those churches in the country.

And that's it. And yet the gospel is doing its work there. Jesus Christ is drawing people to himself there. They believe the same things, but there's no cultural dominance. They're the vast, vast minority in that culture. And, um, but still they love the Lord. And, uh, still they're serving him. So you don't have to be the

cultural majority to, um, to hold, to hold Christian convictions.

And to believe that really does offer the, the most satisfying answers. That it really is the, the truth.