



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Series Notes

From Oral to Written

David Anguish

In 2006, the movie adaptation of Dan Brown's novel, The Da Vinci Code was released to much acclaim, and many believers found themselves challenged by questions about the origins of Christianity they had never before considered. The importance of those questions was heightened by Brown's claim at the beginning of the book (my Anchor Books paperback edition was published in 2003) that, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" (p. 1; emphasis mine). In other words, although the book's story is fictional, on matters of history, and the New Testament in particular, Brown said (and repeated in news interviews) that he was writing what had really occurred.

Like many preachers and writers, I took advantage of the opportunity to publicly discuss a major point of contention: how did the New Testament canon come to be, why did it take the form it did, and when was the list as we have it finalized? As a student of Christian apologetics, this gave me a chance to fill a void in my teaching library. To that end, I benefitted from attending two lectures by Dr. Jim Baird at one of the Oklahoma Christian University Bible lectures programs during which he responded to Brown's claims and generally looked at the evidence for the canon. Those lectures, which occurred before the movie's release, along with some email correspondence with Dr. Baird afterward encouraged me to pursue the presentation to a local church audience of what is, to put it mildly, a complex story of canon development.

I see this series as a primer on the subject, designed to introduce the basics to a church audience with very little, if any, knowledge of the issue (in large part, because we just have not taught it). In the main, these three outlines are what I used as my lecture notes in 2006. I have made a few stylistic changes, updated some internet links, included some modifications that appear in the third edition of Bruce Metzger's book on New Testament background and content (first cited in part 2), and re-worked the material on gnosticism (part 3). These notes are dated in the sense that the attention of our culture (and churches) has moved on from Da Vinci to other specific concerns. However, a search of the internet and social media will reveal numerous defenders of claims similar to Brown's. Doubtless, further research would allow me to sharpen and modify these notes. But the basic approach would remain the same, for the story and the evidence are the same. In our current cultural environment, we who profess allegiance to the Lord Jesus will be wise to become better acquainted with it.

David Anguish
June 2016

Introduction

1. My intention is not to respond to every challenge posed by Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, but to focus on one challenge in an area of study where we should have taught more.
2. Here are the related issues of concern in this study; we will focus on the second.¹
 - a. What did the Christians believe about Jesus and when did they believe it?
 - b. Were the twenty-seven writings that make up our New Testament selected so the Emperor could expand his power and that of the Roman Church?

¹ See Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to Questions Everyone's Asking* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2004), 60-61.

3. Here are Brown's statements of the claims that are pertinent to our discussion.²
 - a. The New Testament as we have it is a fourth century creation that "was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda — to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base" (pp. 254-255).
 - b. Under the direction of Emperor Constantine, the Council of Nicea (A. D. 325) revised orthodoxy about Jesus:
 - 1) "Until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet" (253).
 - 2) "Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of the early Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power" (253).
 - 3) Jesus was declared to be the Son of God by the Nicean Council by a vote, "a relatively close vote at that" (253).
 - c. If this is true, then the Bible also had to be changed: "Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status four centuries *after* Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His [Jesus'] life as a *mortal* man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history" (254).
 - d. Constantine "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned" (254).
4. Two results have been observed from these statements.
 - a. Some have accepted them and believe that orthodox Christianity is not based on truth.
 - b. Some Christian believers, unfamiliar with church history generally and the specific story of how the canon was formed in particular, had their faith unnecessarily shaken.
5. There is just enough truth in Brown's claims to raise some serious questions among those who are uninformed about how the canon was formed (Brown, *et. al.*, base their thesis on the facts that the canon list was settled over time and that some other writings were excluded, in some cases because they affirmed heretical views).³
6. What really happened? We'll begin with the following.

Body

I. Definition of Canon.

- A. From the Greek *κανών* (*kanōn*), a term of Semitic origin that referred to a "reed [or] straight rod," then to a "measuring rule" (see Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:16).⁴

² Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code*, paperback ed. (New York, NT: Anchor Books, 2003), 253-255. Italics are Brown's.

³ It will be helpful to know Brown's context. His novel popularized a view, it did not invent it. He acknowledged sources he used, in particular *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* [1982], by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. Leigh Teabing, the novel's chief proponent of the theory summarized above, was named after two of the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Teabing's surname is an anagram of Baigent). In other words, what Brown claimed about the church's views of Jesus and the development of the canon were neither new nor isolated.

⁴ Frederick W. Danker, with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 187.

- B. "The canon of Scripture thus represents the yardstick by which the church's belief and practice is to be measured; its norms, the list of writings accepted as authoritative or binding."⁵

II. What Do We Know About Canon Selection?⁶

- A. True or False. The 27 writings that make up our New Testament were first listed together as the canon (authorized list of books) in 367 A. D.
- B. True or False. Other early Christian writings besides our 27 books were read as Scripture in several ancient churches.
- C. True or False. There are several other writings known as gospels that were excluded from the canon by the ancient church.
- D. True or False. Although twenty of our current list of NT writings were generally considered canonical by about 130-150 A. D., the remaining seven books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation) remained open to dispute in the 3rd and 4th centuries.
- E. True or False. Persecution and the need to decide which books could not be compromised are among the reasons the church needed to settle on an authorized list of books [canon].

III. Understanding the Beginning.⁷

- A. Many hold this assumption, seen in the way we speak of proving the inspiration of Scripture: the writings were given to us in the one bound edition we currently have (handed down from heaven, black binding, gold trim, with the words of Jesus in red).⁸
1. Paul's epistles show the problem with this view. Although there were cases where churches were told to exchange letters (Col. 4:16),⁹ the general rule was that each church had only the letter Paul wrote to that church; in other words, most of the churches did not at first have a collection of writings to consult and compare.
 2. At the beginning of church history, the word was spread orally.
- B. How did the writings originate?
1. Statements attributed to the earliest preachers and others found in the epistles show that the church considered the Old Testament normative; they were interpreting the OT through the lens of Jesus (see Acts 2:22-36; 13:16-41; also 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," in Frank E. Gæbelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 631.

⁶ I put the following True or False questions on Power Point slides when presenting this material, one without the answers and another with them; as will be demonstrated, all of the following are true.

⁷ This discussion is limited to the New Testament writings.

⁸ Here is where we see a kernel of truth in Brown's claims. He has his historian, Teabing, say that "the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven. . . . The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds." However, in the same paragraph, he also claims that "the Bible is a product of *man*, . . . Not of God. . . . Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book" (Brown, 250-251; emphasis his).

⁹ Of interest is the fact that, so far as we know, only one of the two letters the Colossians were to exchange has survived.

2. They also had the need to supplement the Hebrew scriptures, for Jesus was their unquestioned authority (Matt. 28:18), therefore, in one sense, he was the first canon.
 - a) “The disciples, as pupils of a rabbi, would have memorized his teaching; the ideal disciple, said a near-contemporary Jewish source, is ‘a plastered cistern that loses not a drop.’”¹⁰
 - b) Several NT texts show the influence of Jesus’ sayings, quoting isolated examples from them in ways that indicate they were reaching back before the documents, to the earliest years of church history (Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10, 12; 9:14; 11:23-26; 1 Tim. 5:18).
 3. The writings claim that the authority of the apostles, what we might call the “second canon,” was promised (Matt. 16:19; 18:18) and guaranteed through the Spirit (John 14:26; 16:12-15).
 4. Luke and Hebrews illustrate how Jesus’ teaching moved from oral tradition to written form.
 - a) Luke 1:1-4 — the author was committed to writing “a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered¹¹ them to us” (vv. 1-2, ESV).
 - b) Hebrews 2:3b-4 — a second generation believer tells how he received that which had been declared “through the Lord” (NASB; διὰ τοῦ κυρίου, *dia tou kuriou*) and was then “confirmed to us by those who heard” (note the distinction between those who heard and those, including the writer, who were receiving).
 5. Paul tied the process together (Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Cor. 2:12-13; Eph. 3:3-5).
- C. Why was the move made from oral to written?
1. The above gives a clue: authentication of the message depended on witnesses, people who had personally experienced the events of Jesus’ ministry with their physical senses (see 1 John 1:1-3).
 2. But, what would happen to the message when the witnesses died and as the faith was disseminated ever more widely? Their testimony had to be put in a more permanent form and made available.
 - a) The message was made permanent when the oral testimony was written down.
 - (1) It did not become less secure because it was written; if the witnesses were credible, their written testimony is just as valuable, something we take for granted by our practice of having someone do an affidavit.
 - (2) Furthermore, the idea that people coming to faith now must depend on the testimony of those with firsthand knowledge that we do not have is not new; the NT refers to that kind of situation during the time the various documents were being written (see 1 Pet. 1:8).
 - b) The testimony became more widely available as the writings were circulated among a wider group of people through copies and collections of the documents (see Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27 for some examples of how this occurred).

¹⁰ Walls, 632; quoting from *Piroth Aboth* 2:10.

¹¹ “The word translated “delivered” (παράδιδωμι, *paradidōmi*) is the word also used for “tradition.” Paul also used a form of the word in 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; 2 Thess. 2:10; and 3:15 for teaching that he had *passed on* to early churches.

3. But, which of the many writings that began to appear, several of which were written in the name of the witnesses,¹² were to be accepted as authoritative?
 - a) That question was especially important since the different writings did not always share the same teaching or quality.
 - b) It was also important to determine:
 - (1) Who the true or false teachers were.
 - (2) Which books could be compromised if necessary in the face of persecution.
 - c) We will consider those questions in part 2.

Conclusion

1. Several years ago, I completed a school year's academic study of Christian Evidences with a group of high school juniors. One spent the following summer as a page in Congress. Another accompanied his father, a college professor, on a study sabbatical to Europe the following school year.
 - a. Both contacted me after the class, one with a late night phone call from Washington, the other with a letter from Europe.
 - b. Both asked for help as they faced questions and claims from fellow-students who were not believers.
 - c. Their questions validated, in their case at least, one of my most important goals in teaching the course.
 - d. I was less concerned with whether my students would remember every single detail we had covered (any more than they remembered the details in their other classes) than with whether, when confronted with the questions I knew they would face, they would recall that there was another side to the story.
2. That goal is important here: we face a world where skeptical questions / assertions have gone viral, not to mention a climate that make traditional assumptions less normative.
3. To successfully respond to the challenge, we need to face the questions head-on, and be prepared to give the answers that are available. That's a part of our sanctification (1 Peter 3:15).¹³

*June, 2006; updated June 2016
www.davidanguish.com*

¹² In many cases, such attribution was done to honor or respect the person whose name was used.

¹³ ESV translates 1 Peter 3:15: ". . . but in your hearts *honor* Christ the Lord *as holy*, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; . . ." NASB translates, ". . . but *sanctify* Christ as Lord," while NET translates, "But *set* Christ *apart* as Lord. . ." (all emphasis is mine). The Greek verb is ἁγιάζω, *hagiazō*, to "set apart into the realm of the sacred" (Danker, 3).