



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Series Notes

Why These Twenty-Seven Writings?

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Introduction

1. In this part of our study, we will see why the early church settled on the twenty-seven writings that comprise the New Testament canon.
2. A review of important ideas from parts 1 and 2.
 - a. The New Testament did not come to the church “fully assembled.”
 - i. In the words of Teabing, Dan Brown’s fictional historian who serves as the mouthpiece for his claims about how and when Jesus came to be recognized as deity and the New Testament was determined to be the canon: “the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven. . . . The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds.” That is true.
 - ii. The conclusion that follows is false: “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*”¹ (my emphasis).
 - b. The teaching was disseminated orally and then was later written, collected, and copied (Luke 1:1-3; Heb. 2:2-3).
 - c. There was a process of discernment and selection before all twenty-seven New Testament writings were accepted as canonical and the canon was closed.
 - i. Remember that “the church made the essential decisions quickly and definitively”; the basic selections were made by 125-150 AD.²
 - ii. Later descriptions about what the church believed about the different writings (e.g., Eusebius) refer to what was already in place before the writers reporting on the developments wrote; most of the list had been settled for some time.
 - iii. The writings that were still disputed were widely accepted, evidently by a majority.
 - iv. At the very least, Brown’s extreme skepticism about the acceptance of at least most of the books before the the first third of the fourth century (300s) is demonstrably false.³

¹ Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code*, paperback ed. (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2003), 250-251.

² From the oral presentation, “The Jesus Conspiracy: A Conversation with Carl Holladay on the Canon,” in which Jody Vickery interviewed Dr. Carl Holladay, Professor of the New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University (May 21, 2006, Campus Church of Christ, Norcross, GA). I have an mp3 file that is available upon request. (Permission to cite the presentation granted via email by Jody Vickery, April 23, 2016.)

³ Much of his case depends on skepticism of the four canonical Gospels; they were not included in the disputed books listed by Eusebius, *et. al.*

3. In part 2, we introduced the historical development of the process used to determine the canonical writings. In part 3, we will focus on the criteria used in deciding which books were to be accepted.

Body

I. What About Other Ancient Christian Books?⁴

- A. Contrary to the impression left by popular news reports about them, the existence of these books is not a recent discovery.
1. For example, Iranaeus wrote about the Gospel of Judas in ca. 180 AD.
 2. Judas is authentic in the sense of not being a recent forgery. It was an ancient document written in Coptic (an Egyptian dialect).
- B. We can learn much from the scholarly work that has been done in analyzing the Gnostic texts, work that differs from the pseudo-history employed by Brown, *et. al.*
1. Serious scholarly work on extra-canonical writings sheds light on our understanding of early Christianity and its world.⁵
 2. While some of those who have engaged in scholarly study of the Gnostic texts have proposed alternative views of the history which alleges that Gnosticism was more mainstream than had been traditionally thought, other equally qualified scholars have responded with serious critiques of their views.
 3. The process has been generally positive; as Metzger noted, we have better knowledge of the Gnostic texts and the history generally because those writings were discovered and have been studied.
- C. The principal challenge to the church from within was Gnosticism which, briefly stated, had the following features.
1. "Gnostic" is from *gnōsis*, "to know."
 - a) Gnostics believed they were "the elite — chosen people who, in distinction from the worldly-minded, were able to perceive the delicate connection between world (cosmology), humanity (anthropology), and salvation (soteriology)."
 - b) "The goal of gnostic teaching was that with the help of insight (*gnōsis*), the elect could be freed from the fetters of the world (spirit from matter, light from darkness) and so return to their true home in the Kingdom of Light. . ."⁶
 2. The following were some of the more important traits of gnosticism.
 - a) That they were enlightened because they had received and were mediating "a special and supernatural knowledge" that came to them from "an otherworldly, divine substance . . . [which] enabled humanity to see through the monstrous physical work of the lower creator and to perceive as the true goal of humanity a

⁴ I have drawn these points from comments made by Holladay in the interview cited above.

⁵ "The full extent of this Gnostic threat to the church was not fully grasped until recently because our only documentary evidence came from refutations by orthodox authors, who destroyed all the Gnostic writings they could get their hands on after Christianity came to dominate the empire in the fourth century. In the mid-twentieth century, however, a considerable number of Gnostic writings turned up at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, and our knowledge of various Gnostic teachings has grown rapidly since then." (Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 3rd ed., revised and enlarged [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003], 317.)

⁶ Kurt Rudolph, "Gnosticism," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 1033-1034. The quotations in the following are also from Rudolph.

return to the spiritual realm of God, which was often depicted as the Kingdom of Light.”

- b) Anthropological dualism: a sharp distinction between flesh and spirit.
 - (1) Their explanation of the problem of evil was that a lesser, foolish creator (demiurge) had, “without the permission of the highest and therefore Unknown God,” brought the physical world into existence.
 - (2) The physical was, therefore, inherently evil and needed to be overcome by the spiritual which came from the pure, higher God.
 - (a) A by-product of this view was that the body was bad, a prison.
 - (b) In some forms (e.g., the docetists), the Christ (spirit) was believed to be good, but Jesus (human) was not; the spirit-Christ inhabited the human-Jesus, departing on the cross.⁷
 - (c) Gnostics rejected the doctrine of the incarnation.
 - c) Their ethics apparently derived from their anthropology, leading to the belief that what we do with the body is irrelevant. Moral license was often the result.⁸
3. Contrary to Brown’s assertion, the gnostic gospels do not humanize Jesus, they de-humanize him.
- a) In the four canonical gospels, Jesus is a real person living in human history; one of their attractions is this realism.
 - (1) Because he was fully human, he can identify with us.
 - (2) He is also someone who transcended humanity, demonstrating that we ought to try to be “more than flesh” (see John 1:14-18; 14:7-9).
 - b) In the Gnostic gospels, Jesus is detached from history.
 - (1) In some cases, they depict him as presenting a disembodied teaching (e.g., in the Gospel of Thomas, comprised of a collection of Jesus sayings).⁹
 - (2) He is unconnected to the real world and its concerns (see the first comment under Preliminary Considerations, below).

II. Why the Twenty Seven Writings Were Confirmed.

A. Preliminary considerations.

1. “Various external circumstances assisted in the process of canonization of the New Testament books. The emergence of heretical sects having their own sacred books made it imperative for the church to determine the limits of the canon. Gnosticism posed a real danger to the fledgling church because it threatened to turn Jesus into a myth with its insistence that, as the true spiritual God, he could not have been truly human. He may have appeared to be human, but his body, they maintained, was not a real human body.”¹⁰

⁷ Although most scholars believe gnosticism had not fully developed at the time the Johannine epistles were written, their insistence that the Christ had come in the flesh (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7) is seen as a response to this dualism and at least an incipient form of gnosticism.

⁸ Rudolph notes that their more libertine tendencies are, to date, attested only in orthodox writings which responded to the gnostics, not in the gnostic writings themselves.

⁹ See Metzger, 118-120, for a summary of the Gospel of Thomas.

¹⁰ Ibid., 317.

2. "Another external pressure that forced Christians to be certain which books were Scripture and which were not occurred during periods of persecution. In 303, when Christians were persecuted under Diocletian for their faith, it became a matter of utmost importance to know which books could and which could not be handed over to the imperial police for destruction without incurring the guilt of sacrilege."¹¹
3. "Some will tell us that we receive the twenty-seven books of the New Testament on the authority of the Church, but even if we do, how did the Church come to recognize these twenty-seven and no others as worthy of being placed on a level of inspiration and authority with the Old Testament canon?"¹²

B. Criteria.¹³

1. Inspiration: did the writing come from an inspired writer?
2. Apostolicity: was the author a member of Jesus' closest circle of followers (recall the emphasis on the eyewitnesses and testimony in part 1)?¹⁴
3. Orthodoxy: did the content of the writing adhere to true Christian teaching?¹⁵
4. Universality / Use: was the writing used in one church, in a particular region, or generally throughout all the church?¹⁶

C. Some observations.

1. The tests were stringent.
 - a) The church was determined to make sure that only the books that deserved to be accepted were included. This explains why the process was so deliberate and why it took time for questioned books to be completely accepted.
 - b) As Metzger said, "In the most basic sense neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church."¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 16.

¹³ The items and questions that appear here (except for the word "use" in # 4) are from Holladay. The literature on this matter consistently includes the same items, although specific terminology and organization may differ.

¹⁴ Metzger, 317-318, comments, "As far as can be determined, the chief criterion for acceptance of particular writings as sacred, authoritative, and worthy of being read in services of worship was conformity to what was called the 'rule of faith' (*regula fidei*), that is, the congruity of a given writing with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative for the church. Another criterion was apostolic authorship. This requirement, however, was not applied in a narrow sense, for in the case of two of the Gospels, the tradition of apostolic atmosphere and association (Mark with Peter and Luke with Paul) vouched for their authority. Other tests of canonicity included the question of a book's continuous acceptance and usage in the churches as a sign of its value."

¹⁵ This had been essentially settled when the collection process began, a point of significance relative to Brown's claims. Indeed, the reason they settled on the twenty-seven writings we have was because they upheld orthodoxy.

¹⁶ Metzger, 318, wrote, "Other tests of canonicity included the question of a book's continuous acceptance and usage in the churches as a sign of its value."

¹⁷ Ibid. When Holladay was asked whether he was confident that the twenty-seven books we have are what we should have and if they are capable of supplying our needs, he answered with an unequivocal yes. He then observed that these writings are the earliest, most reliable, and compelling witnesses to Christ and what he meant because they came from the circle of followers closest to him. He especially called attention to Hebrews which, although anonymous, was accepted because the church decided it could not live without its compelling theological witness.

2. The church's agenda in canon selection was orthodoxy, not politics.
 - a) The fact that the canonical writings were essentially decided decades before Nicea (325 AD), though admittedly not listed completely until afterward (367 AD), belies the claims of Brown, *et. al.* that the decision was essentially made by Constantine based on his political interests.
 - b) The criteria applied to the decisions show that the church's agenda was to uphold the apostolic faith, even if that meant discarding a book that had value with regard to edification.
3. We must keep the main point in mind: the books were chosen because they were *different*; we need to esteem and follow them, not just defend their inclusion.
 - a) Since they are so accessible and commonly known, we are susceptible to taking them for granted and not approaching them with the awe that ought to characterize an approach to sacred things (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).
 - b) We might also find ourselves not being as diligent to respect their apostolic authority (see Matt. 16:19; 1 Pet. 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:3-4; Jude 3).
 - (1) Some become impatient with anyone who challenges a new idea with an appeal to "book, chapter, and verse."
 - (2) Yes, some have abused that principle by equating (in practice, if not theory) custom, human traditions, and personal preferences for holy writ.
 - (3) The solution to that problem is more careful attention to distinguishing between the doctrines of men and the will of God (see Mark 7:9-13), not becoming lax in our respect for what the word says.
 - c) In our world of intellectual pluralism, we cannot give too much attention to the need to seek orthodoxy, i. e., right teaching (see 1 Tim. 1:3, 7, 10; 4:6; 5:17; 6:1, 3).
 - d) Equally great at a time when we have access to so many copies/formats (written and digital) of Scripture along with myriad distractions and short attention spans is the challenge to actually use the writings we esteem (see 1 Tim. 4:13).
 - (1) Are the things we insist on from the word or based in custom?
 - (2) Think of it this way: if we were selecting the books for the canon, are we well-versed enough in what is and is not apostolic orthodoxy to make an informed decision?

III. Responding to Current Circumstances.

- A. The modern church generally needs to be more conversant with the canon issue and evidence for it.
 1. Brown and others are able to alarm and/or fool so many because they do not read or know history. This is true of believers, too.
 2. In truth, teachers may have refrained from teaching on this subject because the story is detailed and the questions were not as settled as some might like.
 - a) Is this because we fear what might happen if we tell the true story?
 - b) Is it because we have assumed that "average church members" cannot understand it, or won't go to the trouble to listen?¹⁸

¹⁸ Obviously, the story can be told in a way that overwhelms people with technicalities or comes across as tedious. Studying it will require students to think. I contend that teachers should seek to inform students about what is needed, not just what is comfortable. See John 6:26-66 for an example of this in Jesus' ministry.

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- B. We need to be more intentional about responding to the challenge.
1. Holladay observed that the sale of 50 million copies of *The Da Vinci Code* indicated an interest in these things.
 - a) I would add that, since he made that statement in 2006, social media and the internet provide additional evidence that he was right.
 2. Two observations can be made in light of this idea.
 - a) We have openings for dialogue with some, at least; Paul's Athenian example should inform us (Acts 17:16-34).
 - b) Examining these things is part of "testing the spirits" (1 John 4:1), a way to confirm our convictions, strengthen our faith, and be in a position to give an answer (1 Pet. 3:15).
 3. What we should not do is withdraw from the war (see 2 Cor. 10:1-6).

Conclusion

1. In his *The Text of the New Testament*, Bruce Metzger described how manuscripts were copied before the invention of the printing press, noting how tiring it was to sit on a bench with a lap board for six hours a day, copying a manuscript with a level of quality and attention to detail that did not vary from beginning to end, even as the scribe's muscles cramped and grew stiff. For non-biblical texts, this was simply a way for some to make a living. But, for the faithful scribes who copied the biblical text, it was much more, as the following quotation from one of them illustrates:

By reading the divine Scriptures [the scribe] wholesomely instructs his own mind, and by copying the precepts of the Lord he spreads them far and wide. What happy application, what praiseworthy industry, to preach unto men by means of the hand, to untie the tongue by means of the fingers, to bring quiet salvation to mortals, and to fight the Devil's insidious wiles with pen and ink! For every word of the Lord written by the scribe is a wound inflicted on Satan. And so, though seated in one spot, the scribe traverses diverse lands through the dissemination of what he has written. . . .¹⁹

2. We can be confident about the Bible as we have it. But, as the words of that ancient scribe should remind us, the real question is whether we love the Bible enough to use it, live it, and share its message so that God will continue to be glorified.

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¹⁹ *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones*, edited from the manuscripts by R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1973), 1.xxx.1. Cited by Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd enlarged ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.