

The New Testament Canon of Scripture: A Defense

The word canon comes from the Greek root word meaning ‘reed’, which would be used to measure something. It eventually came to mean ‘standard’. The early church followed three basic principles to determine whether a New Testament book was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). First, the human author of the book had to be an Apostle or a close associate of an Apostle. This would require a first century date of writing. All four of the gospels have internal evidence that proves a date of writing prior to 70 AD. Second, the book had to have already been universally accepted in the churches. In other words, the councils were simply listing the books that had already been considered divinely inspired. Third, the book had to be in agreement doctrinally with the other recognized inspired writings, as well as the entire Old Testament (Luke 24:44-48; Romans 3:2; Psalm 119:89-96). Remember, both Jesus Christ and His disciples claimed Jesus to be God on the basis of fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture (Luke 22:66-71; Acts 2:22-39). Since God by definition cannot lie, there would of necessity be a perfect consistency there (Numbers 23:19).

Paul, John, and Peter (all Apostles) claimed the Inspiration of God in their writings (1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Peter 1:15, 3:1-2; Revelation 1:2). Paul quotes Matthew, Luke, and Peter, affirming them to be Scripture (2 Peter 3:16; 1 Timothy 5:18; Matthew 10:10; Luke 10:7). Not only were all the New Testament writers Apostles or close associates of Apostles, all of these writings agree on every point, because God inspired them (1 Timothy 3:16). Where there may seem to be contradictions, what we really have is complementary statements which illustrate the same truths. For instance, the divinity of Jesus Christ the Son of God is attested throughout the pages of the New Testament (Matthew 28:18; Mark 1:1; Luke 5:20-24; John 10:30; Acts 9:20; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:1-8; Revelation 22:13).

We can know for certain that the New Testament was both already written and being used as authoritative Scripture because of the testimony of the early

church fathers. Both Polycarp and Ignatius, writing in 110 AD, reference as authoritative Scripture no less than eleven books each. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others attest to the widely recognized canonicity of several of the New Testament Books. Tatian was the first on record to attempt a harmony of the four gospels in 160 AD, based upon the recognition in the churches of the fact that there were four and only four Scriptural Gospels. Origen of Alexandria, writing in the early third century, was the first to clearly affirm the canonicity of all twenty-seven New Testament books, although it was not until the Council of Carthage in 397 AD that the New Testament canon was formally ratified.

Today, challenges to the authority of the New Testament canon are being mounted. This is no new thing. Back in the first century, the early Christian 'Gnostics' believed that God imparts secret knowledge which was available only to those 'in the know'. This was so prevalent that the First Epistle of John is written against that backdrop. Notice the number of times He uses the word 'know' in that letter. This type of teaching flies in the face of Jesus' own openness in His teaching (John 18:20), the public nature of His death, and the fact that there were a number of witnesses to the Resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 15:1-8)! First Corinthians was written only twenty years after Christ's death, and the Apostle Paul challenges his readers to check out his assertion by asking those of the five hundred brethren who were still alive at the date of writing! Unfortunately, men and women of all ages oppose the truth. Being sinners by nature, they will find ways around Christ so as not to be accountable, and to maintain their own pride. Challenging the canon is one way this is done, and it is done behind the mask of 'enlightened, intelligent, open-minded thinking'.

We will now briefly address some of the more commonly espoused writings by groups such as the Jesus Seminar who have set about their own renewal of the old brand of critical study of the Scripture. Right off the bat, these purveyors of heresy dismiss the miraculous providence of God in preserving His writings, and often the miraculous altogether. We begin with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This does not meet the Apostolic authorship qualification as it cannot be dated

before 150 AD, and it imputes a sin nature to Jesus, which contradicts the Bible. Next, we have the Gospel of Thomas. Again, we cannot date this prior to the second century. Neither was it accepted in the early churches as inspired. So called scholars today date it very early without any evidence whatsoever, because it contains many of the same saying as we find in the gospels. The writer masquerading as an Apostle not only did quote legitimate gospels, but wrote things that clearly contradict Scripture. For instance, he quotes the Lord as saying that “every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Saying 114b), which clearly contradicts Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28. Then we have the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary (generally attributed to Mary Magdalene). The first implies earthly relations between Jesus and Mary, and the second implies female superiority in the early church. First of all, both can only be dated to the late second century, so the authors could not have been Apostles or close associates of them. Second, neither passes the doctrinal test. Jesus’ love was pure, and his divinity and sinlessness sets Him apart from His Creation and created beings. Even angels were said to have sinned by having relations with human women (Genesis 6:1-5; Jude 6), so far be it from God to do so! Male headship within the family and the church was also maintained into the New Testament based upon creation order (1 Timothy 2:11-13, 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11). With few exceptions (the Didache, for instance), these writings are heretical and not worthy of reading except if one has a real reason to have to understand the heresies.

Thank God that He has seen fit to preserve His Word and make it readily available to us. May each of us be diligent in reading and studying it, so that our faith will grow, and that we will learn discernment. I pray that this brief teaching both encourages and warns you. “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings” (2 Timothy 2:15-16a).