



THE BEREA PAGE

"Examining . . . to see if these things are so" ~ Acts 17.11

Good Advice

"Let us imagine that as you are talking to someone about Christianity, you become aware that he or she is resistant to it. Invite the person to tell you what he or she thinks Christianity is all about. And *listen carefully*. This conversation could provide the basis for important discussions for a long time to come as it allows the person involved to speak about what or she thinks Christianity is all about and why he or she finds it unacceptable." ~ Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 77

Resurrection is Vital

"If we remove the topic of the resurrection from the writings of the New Testament, these writings make little or no sense. The story of Jesus as related in the gospels ends in failure and tragedy. The central theme of the Acts of the Apostles—the witness of the church to the resurrection—makes no sense; and the driving force of Paul's theology (the newness of life that believers enjoy in Christ) is false." ~ Frank J. Matera, *Resurrection: The Origin and Hope of the Christian Life* (Liturgical Press, 2015), 2-3

We Should Talk About the Canon

David Anguish

The February 5, 1988 issue of *Christianity Today* included a supplemental section with five articles on the New Testament canon. Ronald Youngblood began the first with this story:

"Isn't it great that God has given us some additional sayings of Jesus!" said Jim to the other members of his Bible study group. "Listen to this: 'Jesus said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's, and give to me what is mine.'""
"Wait a minute," Cindy responded. "My Bible leaves out that last clause."

"But that's just the point," Jim insisted. "Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't include it, but it's right here in the Gospel of Thomas, an extra New Testament book found in Egypt over 40 years ago!"¹

That story demonstrates why we should talk about the canon. Because of the efforts of academics, popular-level non-fiction authors and novelists, movie producers, and creators of internet content, our case for Christ should address the authenticity, credibility, and unique authority of the New Testament writings. Thus, in this and subsequent articles, I will introduce—and only that—evidence related to this question: *Can we be confident the New Testament canon as we have it is the genuine list of authoritative books or is it an arbitrary collection mandated by church councils in concert with the political hierarchy?*

Let's first consider reasons we have generally not taught about the process of canon collection. First, we have other vital issues to discuss and limited time to do so. Second, nearly all of our teaching happens in settings where the basics of the faith, including which books are authoritative, are assumed.

Third, when we do begin to explore it, we find a story that is complex, even messy.² Assuming we have the time necessary to prepare to present it, do we want to risk creating uncertainty by introducing the ideas of articulate skeptics? But on the other hand, while we should be judicious about when we introduce a believer to critical questions, are we not better off knowing truth than not knowing it? In a culture where many are aware of such issues, are we helping people be

Why God Tests

“God tests for the same reason he put the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden. In the test we discover what we love the most—God or ourselves.” ~ John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (College Press Publishing Company, 1999), 135

Laws, Not Values

“We can see that we have abandoned belief in moral absolutes by looking at one key change in our language about morality: we no longer talk about moral *laws*, but about moral *values*. This may seem to be unimportant, but it is momentous. For *laws* are objectively real; they come from above us and command us. The formula for a moral law is ‘Thou shalt’ or ‘Thou shalt not.’ But *values* have no such strong bite, no absolute demand. They suggest something subjective, not objective: ‘my’ values or ‘your’ values or ‘society’s’ values. Values come *from* us; laws come *to* us. We *invent* values but we are *under* laws. Values are nice ideals to aspire to if we wish; laws tell us what we ought to do whether we like it or not.” ~ Peter Kreeft, *Moral Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions* (Servant Books, 1990), 28

Postmodernism “Accountability”

“Postmodernism, in recognizing that we are all deeply flawed, avoids any return to a classic doctrine of original sin by claiming that humans have no fixed ‘identity’ and hence no fixed responsibility. You can’t escape evil within postmodernity, but you can’t find anybody to take the blame either.” ~ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (IVP Books, 2006), 32

confident in their faith and prepared to “to make a defense” if we never consider the hard questions (1 Pet 3.15)?

Youngblood’s anecdote reminds us that, if we interact with people who are not believers—and [surveys](#) show the numbers of people who self-describe as skeptics or “nones” continue to grow—we can expect to face questions about the authenticity, credibility, and authority of the text. These questions are prompted by the claims of skeptics in some cases, but also by developments like the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Coptic Gnostic documents at Hag Hammadi, Egypt in the 1940s. These writings broaden our understanding of the world of Jesus and the early church,³ but their discovery also prompts questions our grandparents didn’t hear.

Youngblood’s 35-year-old story also shows that this is not a 21st century development. Although the questions are new to many in our churches, many in our culture are well aware of alternate answers to them, as illustrated by “Jim” in the anecdote’s popular-level small group Bible study. As noted above, those who have interpreted the story of canon development differently have been effective in publicizing their interpretation. As Darrell Bock wrote in 2004, a year after the publication of Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,

The recent increase in the number of popular books and articles spawned by this scholarship requires us to pay careful attention to what is happening in our popular culture. As I write, a new wave of popular, quasi nonfiction books is being released that is similar to *The Da Vinci Code*. It is almost a genre in itself.⁴

In the interest of equipping and preparing to make a defense, we need to be informed.

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Notes

¹ Ronald Youngblood, “The Process: How We Got Our Bible,” *Christianity Today*, 32, 2 (Feb. 5, 1988): 24.

² Statements like Carl R. Holladay’s are common in the literature: “Even when the church began to decide which writings it considered most authoritative or which ones possessed enduring value, the process was often messier than we sometimes imagine.” *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2005), 576.

³ See Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon Press, 2003), 317.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to Questions Everyone’s Asking* (Nelson Books, 2004), 91. In 2007, Bock and co-author Daniel B. Wallace noted “the impact of the Internet and cable” on the dissemination of alternate views. *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture’s Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), 21.

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