

Belleville First Assembly of God

Defending Your Faith - 2017

Topic 2: Textual Criticism

Class Goal: Equip the believer to respond to common challenges to Christianity in order to evangelize the lost and to disciple those with doubts.

Objectives for Meeting Our Goal: Upon completing this class, the believer should be able to...

1. Recognize common challenges to Christianity, categorize them, and...
2. Prayerfully and gently respond to these challenges (2 Tim 2:23-26; 1 Peter 3:15)

1. Challenges from your past week or questions from the previous lesson?

2. Introduction: “Because the Scriptures have undergone some two thousand years of transmission [to a worldwide audience], it is only natural to ask: How much has the Bible suffered in the process? Or, to put it more precisely: Is the twenty-first century English Bible an accurate reproduction of the first century Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament? The answer to that question comes from the science of textual criticism.”¹

Bible scholars resort to the hermeneutic (methodology or strategy) of “criticism” (the exercise of judgment) to uncover a text’s original meaning (exegesis).²

- Textual Criticism: Investigates issues of authenticity (trustworthiness).
- Historical Criticism: Investigates issues of genuineness.
- Literary or Source Criticism: Investigates authorship and unity of documents.
- Form Criticism: Investigates genres, myths, poems, etc.
- Tradition Criticism: Investigates pre-written traditions (oral, ritual, etc.)
- Redaction Criticism: Investigates differences in versions or accounts.

3. Textual Criticism (Origination):

- a. **Challenge:** “The Bible is simply a book... written by mere men.” How would you respond?
- b. Class exercise: Write your age, occupation, a definition of morality and ethics, your view on the origin and end of the universe, and your opinion on what happens to people after death.

¹ Geisler, Norman and Nix, William, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986), 321.

² Geisler and Nix, 434-439.

Apologetic Argument (from the Greek ἀπολογία, meaning “a defense, as in court”): Other “sacred” texts (Quran, Book of Mormon, etc.) have a single author, thereby avoiding the opportunity for opposing views. But the Bible was written by 40 authors of varying occupations, over 1500 years, and it still contains a single message about who God is, who man is, and how we can live with God forever. Therefore, the Bible is not like any other “sacred” book. It has one Divine Author who provided oversight for over 1500 years.

c. **Challenge:** The Gospels are not authentic because one may have been copied from another.

Response from Dr. Timothy McGrew, Professor of Philosophy, Western Michigan University: One internal evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels comes from “Undesigned Coincidences: [where] one book may mention in passing a detail that answers some question raised by the other. Such interlocking would be very unlikely if one of them were copied from the other, or both were copied from a common source, or the later book simply added a bunch of legends to the former... Fictions and forgeries don’t interlock like this. Either they don’t interlock at all, or the interlockings are more obvious because they are intended to be noticed. But we would expect to find such undesigned coincidences in authentic records of the same real event told by different people who knew what they were talking about.”³

- Example: Matthew 14:1-2 answered by Luke:8.

- Example: Luke 9:28-36 answered by Mark 9:9.

- Example: John 6:5-7 answered by Luke 9:10-11 (setting) and John 12:21 (residence).

- Example: Mark 6:31, 39 answered by John 6:4.

- Example: Luke 23:1-4 answered by John 18:33-38.

And many others. What are the odds that collusion and copying was that detailed?

4. Textual Criticism (Preservation): Manuscripts are handwritten literary compositions (as opposed to typed, inscribed, engraved, etc.). Biblical autographs (original apostolic/prophetic-directed manuscripts) do not currently exist. This could be due to man’s proclivity to worship relics (2 Kings 18:4), or to prevent tampering (it is practically impossible for an ancient person to make changes to thousands of existing copies). Even though a specific reading in the original *text* cannot be known with 100 percent accuracy, the *truth* preserved by copies of that text may still be 100 percent accurate⁴ (more in Topic 5).

a. The Hebrew OT has impeccable integrity. Manuscript copies were meticulous,⁵ as seen in a comparison between the Masoretic Text (900 AD) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (100 BC).

b. 5366 partial and complete NT manuscripts have been found, along with papyri, ostraca, inscriptions, and lectionaries that include portions of Scripture. Additionally, non-Biblical writings from the first century corroborate the style and content of NT books. Also, we have the witness of the early church fathers, who provided over 36,000 quotations from the NT before the Council of Nicea in 325].⁶ In other words, the Christian world readily accepted the NT that we have today prior to any council’s formal vote.

³ McGrew, Timothy, *The Ring of Truth: How the Gospels Authenticate One Another*, lecture slides from Reasonable Faith webinar, April 2017, slides 7-8,

⁴ Geisler and Nix, 44.

⁵ Geisler and Nix, 348-349, 385, 510.

⁶ Geisler and Nix, 427.

c. **Challenge:** *The Da Vinci Code* claims that Emperor Constantine (at Nicea Council) fabricated and selected only those NT books that fit his personal agenda. Your response?

(1) _____

(2) _____

d. **Challenge:** Destructive critics like to point to the over 200,000 variants that exist between NT manuscripts and like to name them “errors.”⁷ How would you respond?

These variants occur in only 10,000 places among the manuscripts (the same verse may have a variant in multiple manuscripts that mentions it). So how significant are these 10,000 places? Most are mechanical matters (spelling or style), and another significant portions are trivial in their effect on the meaning. Some scholars thus conclude that 98-99% of the Bible is without significant concern for original meaning.⁸ Compare this with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or with Hindu’s *Mahabharata*, and the Bible’s trustworthiness is impeccable!⁹

5. **Conclusion:** Given the arguments above for the integrity of the text via the science of textual criticism, and when coupled with external evidence supplied by apologetics, today’s Bible is objectively over 99.5% trustworthy. Then by adding trust in the providence of God for origination and preservation, and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, a believer is able to easily move to a solid 100% Bible authenticity.¹⁰ This therefore gives as a sound justification that our belief is indeed true (remember JTB from Topic 1).

Next two weeks: Pastor Jeff will present more Internal Evidence for why the source of our faith (the Bible) may be trusted.

⁷ Geisler and Nix, 467-473.

⁸ Geisler and Nix, 474.

⁹ Geisler and Nix, 475.

¹⁰ Geisler and Nix, 346.