

Belleville First Assembly of God

Defending Your Faith - 2017

Topic 5: Manuscripts and History

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)

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1. Questions from previous discussions or challenges?
 - a. Reasons to Believe (Reasons.org) – Scientifically-based Apologetics
 - b. Reasonable Faith (ReasonableFaith.org) – Philosophically-based Apologetics
 - c. Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM.org)
 2. Introduction (Review from Topic 2): 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 accurate¹
 - a. The Hebrew OT has impeccable integrity. Manuscript copies were meticulous,² as seen in a comparison between the Masoretic Text (900 AD) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (100 BC).
 3. New Testament Manuscripts:
 - a. Quantity: Secular historians use the sheer number of existing manuscripts of a work as one method of determining the authenticity of that work's contents. How does the NT compare? There are nearly 5,700 hand-written Greek manuscripts of the NT, and 9000 in other languages. Some are complete books, and others are fragments. This does not include the numerous papyri, ostraca, inscriptions, and lectionaries that also include portions of Scripture. Compared to this nearly 15,000-source library, the next largest number of copies of an ancient book is Homer's *Iliad* (643), followed by Demosthenes (200), Herodotus (8), Plato (7), Tacitus (20), Caesar (10), and Pliny (7). Liberal scholars have no problem believing the authenticity of these secular works, based on only a few manuscripts, so why do some still question the authenticity of the New Testament with nearly 15,000 manuscripts to support it?³

¹ Geisler, Norman and Nix, William, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986), 44.

² Geisler and Nix, 348-349, 385, 510.

³ Adapted from Turek, Frank and Geisler, Norman, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Crossway, 2004), 225-228.

b. Style: Non-Biblical writings from the 1st century corroborate the style and content of NT manuscripts, further adding to its authenticity.

c. Proximity: Secular scholars also like to use the amount of years between the original document and manuscripts as an indicator of the authenticity of the manuscript's content. All NT originals were written within 60 years of the life of Christ. The earliest undisputed NT manuscript is a fragment of the Gospel of John (18:31-33, 37-38), dated at 117-138 AD, and there are many others that are disputed to be even earlier. Because the Gospel of John was written around 90 AD (57 years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension), this fragment was therefore written a mere 84 years after Jesus walked the Earth, and only 27 years after the original Gospel was penned! Compare this to the most accurate secular ancient writings and we find the earliest manuscripts on Homer written 500 years after the original, Pliny at 750 years, Caesar and Tacitus at 1000 years, Plato at 1200 years, and Herodotus and Demosthenes at 1400 years after the original was written. How can liberal scholars accept the authenticity of these secular documents with such huge time gaps, but reject the authenticity of the New Testament with only a few years' gap?

d. Early Church History: Even as the New Testament writers embraced the inspiration of the Old Testament, so the "church fathers" (bishops and apologists from 1st - 3rd centuries AD) embraced the inspiration of both the Old and New Testaments.⁴

- The Church Fathers provided 36,289 quotations from the NT before the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD (proving that the Christian world readily accepted the NT that we have today prior to any council).⁵
- "Canon" comes from the Greek κανών, meaning "rule" or "measuring stick", and was first used in reference to an authoritative list of books by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in 367 AD. By 393 AD (the Council of Hippo) and 397 AD (the Council of Carthage), our current twenty-seven NT books were recognized as canon.⁶ Long before this, however, the churches throughout the Roman Empire formed a consensus (not without challenges) as to which books would be used for standard Christian belief and practice (based mainly on authors deemed to be apostles or closely related to them). This can be seen as early as circa 200 AD (a mere 100 years after the writing of some epistles) with Origen of Alexandria's list of twenty-seven books.⁷
- "If there were no biblical manuscripts available today, the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from the writings of the church Fathers of the first three centuries [over 36,200 NT quotations]... with the exception of [only] eleven verses."⁸
- Radical changes in the lives of NT believers:
 - In the midst of devout Jews, believers changed their day of worship to the 1st day.
 - In the midst of devout Jews, believers considered NT writings as "Scripture".

⁴ Geisler and Nix, 99-105.

⁵ Geisler and Nix, 427.

⁶ Shelley, Bruce, *Church History: In Plain Language* (Nashville: Zondervan, 2008), 66.

⁷ Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 25-29.

⁸ Geisler and Nix, 466.

- In the midst of a perverse pagan world, believers lived pure lives.
- In the midst of devout Jews and emperor-worshipping Romans, believers considered Jesus as Deity, even to the point of torturous persecution.

e. **Challenge:** “The New Testament is simply another collection of ancient Greek and Roman writings with no supernatural agency behind it.” How would you respond?

Possible response: Throughout the early church’s struggle to endure persecutions from Rome (such as Diocletian’s in 303 AD), manuscripts were the favorite target, and many Christians sacrificed their lives rather than reveal the location of certain manuscripts. This fact alone should show the importance that these writings held. How many secular ancient books have been the target of persecution? Or how many have been protected by the very lives of their readers? Or how many have been quoted by followers so often that they may be reconstructed by the quotes alone? Additionally, Scripture does not follow the style of typical myths from ancient literature (hero always wins, flawless character, etc.). Even critics have noted how Scripture often portrays God’s use of flawed characters. Christ’s lineage is a primary example (Moabite, prostitute, Judah’s licentiousness, evil kings, etc.).

4. Conclusion: We are justified that our belief in Biblical Christianity is true knowledge because of overwhelming evidence from manuscripts and from the history of the Early Church.