



by MICHAEL DELLAPERUTE

The Bible Challenge

Imagine this: You are on your way to speak to a small group of Christian students at a local college. They requested that you address the topic of the Bible, specifically explaining why Christians believe these 66 books are the inspired Word of God. Sure, the thought of presenting on a secular campus makes you nervous. However, you are honored to challenge these young believers. You are also well prepared. You have several copies of ancient documents freshly printed from ccel.org on hand, along with John Feinberg's *Light in a Dark Place* and Paul Wegner's *The Journey from Texts to Translations*. These resources should provide ample support if needed,

particularly Feinberg's "Part 3" and Wegner's "Part 2." You also stopped for a carton of doughnuts and a box of fresh coffee to ensure that your audience is warmed and filled. "Here am I, Lord," you utter as you pull into a visitor parking space.

You make your way across a busy campus to the designated meeting hall. The atmosphere is almost exactly as you'd imagined. The huge, echoey stone chamber appears to swallow the tiny group of believers huddled inside. Upon your arrival, the leader greets you apologetically. Apparently only five of the nine members are expected to attend. "More doughnuts for the rest of us," you reply as you dole out the loot and get acquainted with the group. After a brief time of prayer, food, and fellowship, you break out your notes and prepare to share. That is precisely the moment your plans unravel.

Without warning, two dozen activist students led by a radical professor hijack your presentation. You are immediately intimidated by their presence. Their bodies are covered with piercings and tattoos, their hair is dyed every color of the rainbow, and their clothing is smattered with vulgar messages. As you gaze in shock, the young leader of the Christian group springs to her feet and attempts to welcome her fellow students. Her efforts are met with a hostile silence.

"We thought we would audit your lecture," the professor sneers as he presents you with a flyer the Christian group used to advertise this meeting. "We would love to hear more about why we should believe the 'goat-herder's guide to the galaxy.' Please proceed." As though following their leader's cue, his proselytes draw up seats in a ring behind their professor. To your left, over 20 individuals dare you to defend your faith. To your right, five young believers silently beg God that you do not mess this up! This is not how you expected to spend your afternoon.

You draw a deep breath and decide to lead with 2 Timothy 3:16. "The Bible is self-authenticating," you explain. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and—"

"Excuse me," the professor interrupts. "If this is going to be an exercise in circular reasoning, I don't want to waste any more of our time." Several of his students exchange derisive glances as he continues, "The argument 'We should trust the Bible because the Bible says we should trust the Bible' may fly in church, but not in the real world. Do you have anything else, or are we finished here?"

After a brief pause you reply, "Yes," to the shock of everyone in the room, including yourself. "I just thought I would begin by demonstrating that Scripture is internally consistent. If you insist on putting a witness on the stand, shouldn't you at least hear their testimony before rendering a verdict?" Your logic reverberates through the hall like the thud of a dropped gauntlet.

"So," the professor queries as he rises to his feet, "I guess all I need to do is claim to have a message from God, and simpleminded religious folk like you will believe that too? I'll have to remember this for my next book. I'll call it *Lucky Number 67!*" Several of his students laugh at the thought of their professor's book being added to Scripture. This is clearly a hostile audience. You adjust your approach accordingly.

"There is a little more to it than that," you reply, allowing your words to dangle in midair like bait on a hook. It does not take long for the professor to bite.

"Well," he jeers, "I'm on pins and needles. If I want to get my next book inducted into that Bible of yours, what else will I need?"

"Correspondence, coherency, and of course, canonicity, for starters," you answer, quieting the room with your concise retort.

At this point, a purple-haired student to your left speaks up,

posing what seems to be an innocent question as she appears to take notes: "What is canonicity?"

"I'm glad you asked," you respond with equal sincerity. "Canonicity describes the standards that were used both to recognize God's Word and, by extension, to distinguish Scripture from all other writings. Only the 66 books of the Canon meet that standard."

"Oh," she replies. "I always thought a group of men picked whatever books they liked best long after they were written, and then made them into the Bible."

"Centuries after they were written," the professor adds sarcastically, "chosen by men in power, who leveraged their position to remain in power."

"That's not exactly correct—" you begin, but before you can continue, you are cut off again by the professor.

"Are you seriously going to waltz into my college and tell me that the Council of Carthage did not convene in 397 CE to create your Bible? Was there some other secret church meeting that occurred before this date that I am not aware of? Or are you also in the business of rewriting history?"

"No," you humbly concede over a din of condescending murmurs, "the date for Carthage is correct. However, the council did not create the Bible. It represents the conclusion of a careful process of discovery that began almost immediately after the ink dried on the New Testament autographs and long before the church represented any sort of power in the world. Just for one example, most scholars date a text called the Muratorian Fragment as early as AD 170. This ancient fragment contains a list of recognized and rejected works. I printed a copy in case anyone would like to check for themselves." Your hands shake slightly as you retrieve the document and present it to your audience. "As you can see, the authors recognized 22 of the 27 New Testament books as Scripture within a century of their writing."

"That proves nothing," quips the professor.

"Actually," you challenge, "it does prove that the church was engaged in carefully distinguishing God's Word from all other texts long before Carthage. The Muratorian Fragment also contains a list of works that were rejected, and for good reason. In its closing lines 81–85, it states, 'We accept nothing whatever of Arsinous or Valentinus or Miltiades, who also composed a new book of psalms for Marcion, together with Basilides, the Asian founder of the Cataphrygians.'"

As you finish stumbling over the last of the awkward names, you hand the page to the purple-haired young woman, who immediately verifies your assertions.

The professor simply shrugs. "One partial ancient manuscript does not a smoking gun make."

"True, but it demonstrates how, long ago, men like Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides had the same idea as your professor," you continue, directing your comments to the young woman and her colorful friends. "So the church established a set of criteria to recognize Scripture. One of those criteria is called apostolicity. Since the apostles were eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ, apostolicity means that the

New Testament text had to be written either by an apostle, like John or Paul, or by someone closely associated with an apostle, like Mark or Luke. Apostolic authority is supported by Scriptures like Ephesians 2:20. So I'm sorry," you continue, redirecting your sympathetic comments to the professor, "but unless you're a lot older than you look, I do not think you can meet the minimal standard of canonicity."

"Is that correct, professor?" The purple-haired girl continues to take notes as she and several of her friends are clearly engaged in the dialogue.

"This," begins the professor, "is a perfect example of how a powerful entity like the church attempts to build its case on a single strand of scrawny evidence. Yes, the fragment exists, but let's not ignore the fact that there is debate as to whether it should be dated to the second century or the fifth. Furthermore, without the entire document, there is no way of knowing exactly what the church believed. So if this scrap of contended history is all you can offer as proof, then you have some serious holes in your argument."

"I agree," you answer, to the shock of the five young believers who had been relishing the debate up to this moment.

"So, if you turn the page over, you will see that I also printed out some other early witnesses, including Eusebius. There is nearly universal consensus that Eusebius wrote *Ecclesiastical History* almost a century before Carthage convened. Eusebius was responding to a man named Montanus, who also claimed to have a God-inspired message. Eusebius explained, 'It is impossible that anything should be added or diminished' from the New Testament. He then proceeded to organize the various religious texts of his day into four categories of 'accepted books, disputed books, spurious works, and absurd works.' As you can see from his list, long before Carthage, all the books of the New Testament were either generally or universally accepted, while all other works were recognized as counterfeit."

"I see Thomas made the list for absurd works," chimes in a young man covered in nose and eyebrow piercings. "Thomas was an apostle. Why wasn't his stuff good enough?"

"Apostolicity was a tool the church used to recognize Scripture," you admit, "but not the only one."

"Yes," adds the professor, to the distress of several of his students. "They also used presupposition, misogyny, and bigotry."

Ignoring the professor's attempt at an ad hominem attack, you explain, "The Gospel of Thomas brings up other aspects of canonicity, including authenticity and antiquity. With regard to authenticity, even skeptics like your professor—no offence . . ." You kindly look at your opposition.

"None taken," he responds, donning the title like a badge of honor.

"Well, pretty much everyone recognizes that the Gospel of Thomas was not written by the disciple Thomas," you continue. "It belongs to a group of counterfeit works or pseudepigrapha, and its earliest possible date of writing is late in the second century. That is why older witnesses like Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and even the Muratorian

Fragment do not mention Thomas, but they do recognize New Testament works. Since Thomas was written later and by an imposter, it fails the test of authenticity. But that's not the only reason . . ."

Once again, you allow your words to linger, until the piercing-boy finally asks, "What else is wrong with Thomas?"

"Well, have you ever taken the time to read Thomas?"

"No," he answers comically, "but I did read *The Da Vinci Code*."

To the dismay of everyone seated to your right, you respond, "Me too." Once the commotion dies down, you explain, "Listen, contrary to what you may have read in fictional works by Dan Brown or even nonfictional ones by Bart Ehrman, the church is not trying to hide evidence or suppress the truth. The beauty of Christianity is that it not only tests itself, but also invites its challengers to 'come and see.' Texts like the Gospels of Thomas and Mary are easily accessible online, and I would encourage you all to read and compare them to the four Gospels of the Bible."

"Wait," the young man replies. "Did you just say you want me to read the Gospel of Thomas? I can look it up on my phone right now."

"Have at it," you answer. "Of course, I'd prefer you read the Bible, but see for yourself if you must. When you find Thomas, do me a favor and read chapter 1, verse 7."

"I got it!" he shouts after a second of searching. "Thomas 1:7. Jesus said, 'Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man.'"

For the first time this afternoon, the small section to your right bursts out with laughter. Confused by their response, the piercing-boy asks, "What's so funny?"

The leader of the Christian group quickly composes herself and gently responds, "I'm sorry. I just finished reading the Gospel of John in my devotions, and that does not sound like something Jesus would say."

"That," you explain, "is an example of the canonical test of antiquity. You see, there is a huge distinction between deciding which books are the Word of God and recognizing a message that God inspired. The church was tasked with the latter, and to accomplish that, they developed a criteria that considered both the identity of the human writer and the actual content of the book. Sure, over time, healthy discussion and debate occurred about which books should be included in the Bible. However, when your professor tries to paint a picture of a group of men cherry-picking texts three and a half centuries after Jesus lived, that misrepresents the process."

"You are the one who is twisting the facts," the professor shoots back. "In the end, you believe in a book written by men that is full of contradictions and—"

This time it's your turn to interrupt the professor. "Actually, professor, the Bible delivers a coherent message from Genesis to Revelation. Even though God used a variety of writers over many centuries to reveal His Word progressively, the

message of sin and redemption is unified. This fact, which is another test of canonicity, separates the 66 books of the Bible from all other religious writings; and in the process, it also separates all other religious texts from the Bible. The church was able to recognize God-inspired texts by applying the tests of apostolicity, authenticity, antiquity, and coherency in the centuries leading up to Carthage. Have any of you ever heard of Athanasius?"

Every head in the audience shakes slowly side to side, except for the professor, who now stands motionless before you. "Athanasius," you continue with newfound confidence, "delivered a famous Easter Letter about 30 years before Carthage. In that letter, he speaks on behalf of believers, identifying the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament as God's Word. After recognizing these 66 books, Athanasius writes in line 6: 'These are fountains of salvation; that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these.' So the Council of Carthage ultimately ratified what Christ's followers had already recognized for centuries. Does this help explain the process?"

"Yes," the purple-haired girl responds, "except for correspondence."

"Young lady," you reply, suddenly feeling the weight of the moment, "may I ask you and your friends a question for a change?"

"Okay," she responds somewhat reluctantly.

"Honestly, have any of you ever taken the time to read the Bible?"

The room grows quiet as several students on both sides of the aisle suddenly seem convicted. After a moment of awkward silence, you continue, "Listen, there was once a time in my life when I thought the Bible was little more than a boring,

irrelevant book of myths. Of course, that was before I read the Bible for myself. I was about your age," you say, directing your comments to the purple-haired girl. "And I was going through a tough time, when a friend challenged me to read one of the Gospels. I chose Mark, mostly because it was the shortest one." Several of the students laugh at your confession. "But something unexpected and incredible happened as I read about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Scripture. The Word of God is so powerful that it changed me, as it has changed millions of others over the course of history. That is correspondence. It describes the power of God's Word in my life."

"So," you conclude, "after hearing how we can trust that the Bible is the Word of God, may I challenge you to go and taste and see for yourselves? If you are willing to read the Gospel of Mark, then I am willing to come back and discuss it with you next week. What do you say? Will any of you accept that challenge?"

Imagine the outgoing young leader of the Christian group and her four reserved friends, the arrogant professor, the purple-haired girl, the pierced boy, and the rest of the gang sitting in a semicircle, considering your offer as the Holy Spirit moves among them. How do you think they will respond?

Now, how will you respond? **B**

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