

CONFIDENCE IN THE BIBLE PART THREE: THE CANON

Jude 1-4

"Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and a brother of James: To those who are the called, loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ. ² May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. ³ Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write and exhort you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all. ⁴ For some men, who were designated for this judgment long ago, have come in by stealth; they are ungodly, turning the grace of our God into promiscuity and denying Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord."

INTRODUCTION

When **Jesus** was born, all sorts of ideas were swirling around about how people could become pleasing to God (or the gods), how they could tap their divine potential to experience a fuller life, or how they could gain salvation from death and the meaninglessness of life. We here today know none of us can live forever. Our Christian faith allows us to profess with certainty we're going to a far better and happier place in the Lord's presence when we die. Yet, there's enough uncertainty about exactly *what* will happen to us after we die that we often want to cling to our life on earth as long as possible. Three Christian friends died in a car accident. Before they passed through Heaven's gates, they found themselves in a pre-Heaven orientation. Angels asked them, "When you are in your casket and your friends and family are mourning you, what do you hope they would say about you? If this is what they actually say, we are allowed to report their words to you." The first guy says, "I would like them to say that I was a great doctor and a loving family man." The second guy says, "I would like them to say that I was a caring husband and a schoolteacher who made a huge difference to kids." The last guy says, "I would like them to say –LOOK! He's moving!"

Christianity's remarkable early growth climaxed when Emperor Constantine professed his faith in Christ in A. D. 313 and made Christianity the Empire's favored religion. Yet, many Romans never truly yielded themselves to **Jesus** as Savior and Lord. Instead, they embraced an, "if you can't beat them, join them" attitude. They often joined the new churches and tried to sway Christian teachings toward ancient and new heresies, as Jude, **Jesus'** half-brother, warned in **vs. 4**. "Heresy" comes from a Greek verb meaning "to choose" and can be defined as "the willful and persistent choice by baptized church members to reject any essential Christian teaching." Around A.D. 90, the Apostle John commented upon such attacks upon Christianity from within the churches (**I John 2:18-19**, NCV): "You have heard that the enemy of Christ ["Antichrist"—Holman] is coming, and now many enemies of Christ ["antichrists"] are already here. This is how we know that these are the last days. These enemies of Christ were in our fellowship, but they left us. They never really belonged to us; if they had been a part of us, they would have stayed with us."

These early heretics within the Christian churches had one goal: to lead people away from the Biblical **Jesus** to follow "a different gospel," as Paul warned about in **Galatians 1:6-8**: "I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the good news about the Messiah. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!" Here are a few humorous examples of a "different gospel" that distort the truths of sin and salvation. *Q. What is "Original Sin"?* A. What most teenagers wrongly assume their parents never thought of doing. *Q. What would the normal church member do if told that there were one thousand types of sin?* A. Ask to see the list. *Q. The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," is about parents. Is there a commandment about brothers and sisters?* A. Yes; the Sixth: "You shall not murder." *Q. How do people who spend too much time hanging out in a barber shop or beauty parlor quote the Great Commission?* A. "Go into all the world and preach the gossip." *Q. Why was Eve created second?* A. The second model is always new and improved.

Galatians 1:6-8, written less than 30 years after **Jesus'** ascension, accurately describes our world today. I will proclaim this "different gospel" to you in general terms that could have been drawn from the early second century A.D. or from a number of recent writers and preachers. Can you figure out what is being left out that is crucial to Christianity, which misleads people to another "Jesus" than the **Jesus** of the Bible?

Each of us was born with a spark of God in us. Every struggle we experience, every harmful impulse we yield to, is due to being separated from the Divine Being. Sin—acts destructive to ourselves, others, or society—along with personal shortcomings, are merely ignorance. The right knowledge, the right education, the proper reorientation of how we think of ourselves in our relationship with God, would unlock our God-given potential. **Jesus** told us in **Luke 17:21** (KJV), "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." This explains why **Jesus** declared in **Matthew 17:20**, "I assure you: if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will tell this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." **Jesus** reminds us a higher power resides in each of us. Positive thinking and words activate this power to generate positive results. If we would apply **Jesus'** teachings, we could achieve success and begin to live up to our Godlike abilities. Salvation comes by seeking to experience conscious oneness with the God who is in us, of whom we are already a part, instead of accepting the illusion of separation from God.

People use such slick terms to pitch this "gospel" as true Christianity. They don't realize their promise of activating our godlike abilities sounds much like what Satan pitched to Adam and Eve. Despite God's emphatic warning not to eat the forbidden fruit upon punishment of death, Satan urged Eve, "How could partaking of something that, to your eyes, is 'good for food and delightful to look at, and . . . desirable for obtaining wisdom,' possibly be wrong?" "You will not die," Satan tempted her to believe. "In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God" (**Genesis 3:5**). Each time we twist what God has told us in the Bible to excuse making a god of our own desires, or each time we get an inflated notion of our superiority that forgets we are mere human beings indebted to our Creator for our life and abilities (**I Corinthians 4:7**) and destined to die and return to dust, we fall for the oldest lie on this planet. Muhammad Ali passed away on June 3, 2016. In his heyday as heavyweight boxing champion of the world, he once took a seat on a 747. It started to taxi to the runway for takeoff when a flight attendant walked by and noticed he did not have on his seatbelt. She said, "Please fasten your seatbelt, sir." Ali looked up proudly and snapped, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." Without hesitation, she looked him in the eye and said, "Superman don't need no plane." On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit supernaturally gave birth to the Christian Church after bursting upon **Jesus'** earliest followers as "a violent rushing wind" and tongue-like "flames of fire," Peter told the "amazed" crowd, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (**Acts 2:1-7, 36-38**, NASB). What do you think Peter believed we need to repent of in order to receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us on the Cross—that our failures are due to our untapped godlike powers? No! Sin is not careless ignorance of how much we are already one with God; sin is a willful desire to be our own god!

What does this background have to do with a sermon on the Canon of Scripture? Everything! Early Christians took seriously Jude's exhortation in **vss. 3-4**, "to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all." They were as diligent to preserve the text of the Bible, as recorded by Christ's Apostles who led the early Church, as they were diligent to preserve the teachings of **Jesus** and His Apostles that were "entrusted" to the Church. We'll now explain how they set the canon of Scripture.

I. FALSEHOODS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL CANON

A popular writer today makes the following claims about the Bible's origins. "The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven." True. But this writer goes on to say, "The Bible is a product of *man*, not of God. . . . [I]t has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book." This writer's name is Dan Brown. His 2003 book, *The Da Vinci Code*, is good entertainment. This helps explain why it sold 80 million copies worldwide. But *The Da Vinci Code*, where Dan

Brown presents his claims about the Bible's lack of reliability, is grossly distorted history. Last week's sermon explained why the New Testament is the best-attested ancient history text of all time! Every possible copyist error that may have crept in to the earliest copies we have has had multiple ways to be checked and corrected. We can be nearly as confident of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament due to startling manuscript discoveries in the last 60 years. We have never before been more confident the text of the Bible we possess today, upon which all translations are based, is identical to the Bible as it was written!

II. FACTS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL CANON

People have made every possible false claim about how the Bible as it exists today came about. None of these assertions hold up to the facts. "Canon, which literally means "cane" or "measuring rod," is the name given the list of writings that "measure up" to the Biblical standards of being the genuine, Divinely inspired, authoritative Word of God. The canon of Scripture is not an authorized collection of writings upon which a church council conferred its authority. The canon is a collection of writings upon which God conferred His authority. Josephus, a 1st century Jewish historian and contemporary of **Jesus** and the Apostles, drew up a list of books that he said, "are justly believed to be divine" due to the "succession of prophets" who recorded them. This list corresponds exactly to the Old Testament books found in our Bible. Josephus added, "how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them."

Believers of the Church's early years merely approved the Old Testament writings the Jews had already recognized as Divinely inspired. No Church council made this decision. But Church action was needed to affirm the writings of the New Testament canon. From A.D. 64, when Nero blamed Christians for setting fire to Rome, until Constantine granted Christians full toleration and made Christianity the Roman Empire's favored religion in A.D. 313, Christians suffered 10 waves of persecution under hostile Roman Emperors. This persecution and the Roman Empire's vast size allowed only minimal cooperation and policy setting among the widely scattered churches and Church leaders. At Constantine's behest, 318 Church leaders gathered in the town of Nicea in A.D. 325. Fewer than 12 had not lost an eye or a hand or were not lame due to torture, often because they refused to turn over their precious copies of Biblical writings to be burned. These faithful believers were determined to purge the numerous writings various heretics had crafted to reshape Christianity by pre-Christian and non-Christian beliefs. National Geo-graphic reported in 2006, for example, on the rediscovery of the *Gospel of Judas*, written by an early "Christian" sect sometime before A.D. 180. **Jesus** supposedly confided to His best friend Judas Iscariot, three days before Judas betrayed Him, the secret knowledge that enables people to escape the prisons of their material bodies and return to the spiritual realm to regain their former blessed union with the Divine. It's obvious to Biblical Christians the *Gospel of Judas* has nothing to do with the true Gospel of **Jesus Christ!**

At Nicea, Church leaders established three criteria to weed out false documents: Apostolicity, catholicity, and authenticity. First, they verified the documents were written by an Apostle or Apostle's associate (like Mark and Luke). **II Peter 3:15-16** recognizes the Apostle Paul's writings as equal in authority to "the rest of the Scriptures"; giving evidence the conviction already existed the writings of the Apostles were as divinely inspired as the sacred writings of the Old Testament. Secondly, the Church leaders asked which writings of the New Testament era already had catholic, universal acceptance by believers throughout the Roman Empire, and which writings did many churches doubt were genuinely recorded by the Apostles? Thirdly, did they display God's stamp of authenticity by being consistent in doctrine with all writings about which there was no doubt of their Divine inspiration? Lists dating to the 2nd and 3rd centuries of New Testament writings that had already gained the status of Scripture, backed by numerous quotes from these writings by early Christian leaders, helped to guide the Church leaders gathered at Nicea in their

recognition of which books measured up to standards of the New Testament Canon. All rejected documents, like the *Gospel of Judas*, failed one or more of these three tests of inspiration. There were no backroom conspiracies by power hungry clergy to limit the New Testament canon, as some claim. Instead, Spirit-inspired cooperation among those who'd previously paid a dear price to be loyal to **Jesus** guided their efforts to identify and preserve the New Testament writings that proclaim the true Gospel of **Jesus Christ**.

CONCLUSION

Someone once wisely remarked, "Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them." They would rather believe any falsehood about the reliability of the Bible than to admit what is false about themselves.

There's a story of a man who became convinced he was already dead and everything he experienced was an illusion that couldn't be trusted. His concerned wife and friends finally managed somehow to get him to visit a neighborhood psychiatrist. The psychiatrist decided he could cure this man of his illusion of having died by convincing him of even one important fact that would contradict his belief. The psychiatrist decided to use the simple truth that dead men do not bleed. He put his patient to work reading medical texts, observing autopsies, and listening to experts lecture on this subject. After several weeks, the patient told the psychiatrist, "All right, all right! You've convinced me. Dead men do not bleed." The psychiatrist immediately struck him in the arm with a needle and they both stared at the blood that began flowing down his arm. The patient looked down with a contorted, ashen face for a few seconds, and then he cried out, "Good Lord! Dead men do bleed after all!"

Can some people be this stubborn about not admitting that reasonable people can have every confidence in the reliability of the text of the Bible as it exists today? Sadly, yes. God help us all!