

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 5: Christmas and Canon

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All right, welcome back for another Deep Dive. You know, this time we're tackling the New Testament, and specifically some pretty huge questions about it based on some academic work you sent over. Oh, yeah.

Yeah, it's, well, get this, we're going to look at how, like, cultural assumptions might totally change how we see even something as familiar as, you know, the Christmas story. Oh, wow. And then on top of that, we'll uncover how those 27 books even became the Bible to begin with.

Yeah. Oh, that's a big one. It is.

It is. Buckle up, because this is going to be a wild ride. I'm ready.

It really is amazing how we can read these stories that, you know, we've heard our whole lives and still come away with fresh perspectives. Yeah, absolutely. Dr. Mathewson really highlights that using the Christmas story, you know, as a case study.

And I have to admit, the example about the inn totally threw me for a loop, because it wasn't some roadside motel or anything, more likely just a guest room at a relative's house. Right. Not quite the picture-perfect Christmas card scene, huh? Right.

And that shift in perspective, I think, actually deepens the meaning, you know. It wasn't just that there was no room generally, but that even within the family, like Mary and Joseph were kind of on the margins. So it emphasizes their vulnerability even more.

Yeah. And it gets even more interesting, because apparently the stable itself might have been like a small room attached to the house, you know, for privacy, maybe even just a lean-to or something. Okay.

And here's where it gets really wild. Some mangers were actually carved right out of stone. Stone mangers.

Stone mangers. Yeah. It's a far cry from that soft, hay-filled image we usually picture, right? Right.

Yeah. But think about what that stone represents. Yeah.

It's cold, hard, and unyielding. Yeah. It kind of forces us to confront the harsh reality that Jesus was born into poverty and hardship.

Definitely not the romanticized version we often see. It makes you wonder: what other assumptions are we bringing to the Bible without even realizing it? And speaking of

assuming things, how about the New Testament itself? It's not like it just dropped out of the sky, you know, fully formed. Right.

Dr. Mathewson points out that it took centuries for it to become what we know today. So how did they even decide which books to include? Was it like some epic battle of ideas, you know? Well, there was debate for sure, but it was more of a gradual process of discernment within the early church, I think. Okay.

They developed criteria to guide their choices, focusing on writings that aligned with, you know, the core teachings of Jesus and the apostles. So no random scrolls that just sounded cool. They were looking for consistency and authenticity.

Exactly. They also considered whether a text was widely accepted by different Christian communities, kind of like a test of its universal relevance. And of course, authorship mattered a lot.

Makes sense. Ideally, a book was written by, you know, an apostle or at least someone really closely associated with them. Yeah.

You wouldn't want just anyone claiming to speak for Jesus. But here's something that really got me thinking. It seems like even before an official list was settled, some writers already had this sense they were writing something, well, more than just a letter or a story, you know? Oh, interesting.

Yeah. It's what scholars call canon consciousness. Dr. Mathewson points out some pretty fascinating examples of this.

Like in 2 Peter, the author refers to Paul's letters as scripture right alongside the Old Testament. Wow. That's a big deal for such an early text.

Huge. So they were already seeing those letters as having a similar authority to the Hebrew Bible. Yeah.

What other hints are there? Well, in Revelation, for example, the author uses language that echoes Deuteronomy. Okay. Specifically, warning against adding to or taking away from his book.

He's basically saying that his writing carries the same weight as, like, the Old Testament law. So even back then, there was a sense that these texts were, you know, divinely inspired. They were something special.

But not everyone saw it that way, right? There had to be some disagreements about which writings really belonged. Absolutely. In the second century, we have this figure named Marcion who really shook things up.

He believed the God of the Old Testament was totally different from the God revealed in Jesus. Okay. That's a pretty radical idea.

It is. And to be consistent with his beliefs, he created his own version of the canon, you know. Really? Chopping out anything that sounded too Old Testament-y.

Only a heavily edited version of Luke and some of Paul's letters made it through his filter. That's quite the editorial decision. I guess you could say he took canon formation into his own hands, but probably not in the way most people would appreciate.

Right. His actions were definitely controversial, but they might have actually helped the church, maybe inadvertently, to move towards a more defined canon. How so? It forced them to grapple with the question of what truly belonged, what accurately reflected the heart of their faith.

And that's where a key figure emerges: Athanasius. Athanasius. Fill me in.

Who was he, and why is he important in this whole canon saga? Well, Athanasius was a fourth century church father who, in 367 AD, provided the first list of New Testament books that exactly matches the 27 we have today. It wasn't officially official yet, but it was a significant step towards solidifying the canon.

And just a few decades later, the Council of Carthage in 397 AD officially confirmed the same 27 books. So it wasn't like a sudden revelation, but more a process of, you know, prayerful reflection and debate over centuries that really brought us the New Testament we have today. It's incredible to think about those early Christians, like, wrestling with these questions, trying to discern what truly reflected God's message.

It really makes those 27 books feel even more significant. But here's the thing. The New Testament isn't just one giant block of text, right? It's not like reading a textbook cover to cover.

You're absolutely right. Dr. Matthewson really emphasizes the importance of understanding the different genres within the New Testament. It's like, you wouldn't read a poem the same way you'd read a news report.

Right, right. Different forms of writing, different purposes, different styles. So what kind of genres are we even talking about here? Well, we have gospels, which are kind of like ancient biographies.

They tell the story of Jesus' life, but they're not just a collection of facts. They're crafted narratives, each with its own emphasis and theological perspective. So they're not just reporting what happened, but shaping the story to convey a deeper message.

That's interesting. What else is there? We also have the Book of Acts, which is a historical narrative about the early church. It tells the story of how the Christian faith spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

So it's like we get a glimpse into those first few decades after Jesus' ascension, how those early believers navigated persecution and spread their message. And then there are the letters, right? Those always seemed a bit intimidating to me, like eavesdropping on a very old, very serious conversation. Yeah.

The letters are fascinating because they give us a window into the real-life struggles and questions of early Christian communities. Like Paul, for example, he wrote letters to

churches he'd founded, addressing specific issues and offering guidance and encouragement. So it's not just abstract theology, but practical advice for living out the faith in everyday life.

It humanizes those early Christians in a way I hadn't really thought of before. What about Revelation? Now that one is definitely a different beast altogether. Yeah.

Full of strange symbolism and wild imagery. Right. Revelation is classified as apocalyptic literature.

It's a genre that uses highly symbolic language to depict a cosmic battle between good and evil, often culminating in a final victory for God and his people. So those images of dragons and beasts, they're not meant to be taken literally, but they're trying to convey a deeper message about, you know, hope and perseverance in the face of suffering. It's like a code to be deciphered, and understanding the genre gives you the key.

Precisely. Recognizing those different genres within the New Testament is crucial for understanding the intended meaning of each book. It's like we've been given a roadmap to navigate this diverse collection of texts, to appreciate their individual messages and how they all fit together.

But here's a question that keeps popping up for me. Knowing all this stuff about canon formation and different genres, does it actually change how we read the Bible? Does it make a difference in our everyday lives? I believe it absolutely does. Understanding the historical and literary context helps us avoid misinterpreting or misapplying the text.

Okay. Yeah. We can move beyond simply picking out verses that sound good to us and actually grasp the deeper meaning the authors intended to convey.

So we're less likely to take things out of context or impose our own modern assumptions on these ancient writings. We can read them in a more informed and nuanced way. Exactly.

We can start to see connections between different passages, appreciate the overarching narrative, and ultimately encounter God's word in a richer and more meaningful way. It's like we're deepening our understanding of this ancient conversation that's still relevant today. But that brings up another question for me.

How do we actually bridge that gap between the first century and the 21st century? How do we allow these ancient texts to speak into our lives in a way that feels authentic and meaningful? That's where the real work begins, right? It requires humility, a willingness to wrestle with difficult questions, and a commitment to studying the text carefully in its historical and literary context. It's not always easy, but it's incredibly rewarding. It sounds like a lifelong journey of learning and discovery.

And it makes me think about something else Dr. Mathewson mentions: the idea of new scripture. He asks us to imagine how God might be revealing himself through 21st-century genres. It's a thought-provoking question.

What if we're so focused on what we think scripture should look like that we're missing the ways God might be speaking through contemporary forms of expression? That's a mind-

blowing concept. Would we recognize divine inspiration in a blog post, a song, a film? Where do we draw the line? It's a question that pushes us to rethink our assumptions. It's not about replacing the Bible, but expanding our understanding of how God might be communicating with us today.

It's a bit daunting, but also incredibly exciting. It's like we're being asked to recalibrate our spiritual antennas, to be open to encountering God's voice in unexpected places. And it requires discernment.

Not everything that claims to be from God actually is. We need to test the spirits, as the Apostle John said, to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

I love that imagery. It speaks to the balance we need between open-mindedness and critical thinking. But here's what really sticks with me from all of this.

What's that? This whole deep dive has shown me that the Bible isn't just a relic of the past. It's a living, breathing text that speaks to us in fresh and relevant ways even today. Exactly.

It's a conversation that's been going on for centuries, and we're invited to join in, to listen, to learn, and to allow our lives to be transformed by the timeless truths it contains. It's a conversation that's full of surprises, challenges, and ultimately hope. And it's a conversation we can continue exploring as we delve deeper into the fascinating world of the New Testament.

It really is remarkable to think about this ancient text still having so much to teach us today. But I have to admit, this whole idea of new scripture can be a little unsettling. We're so used to thinking of scripture as something fixed, final, bound in a book.

It definitely challenges our traditional understanding. But what if, and hear me out, what if God's revelation isn't confined to just a specific set of texts? Right. What if it's like an ongoing process unfolding throughout history and even in our present moment? It's almost like we need to shift our perspective from seeing scripture as a noun to seeing it as a verb.

Oh, I like that. Like something that's constantly happening, a dynamic interaction between God and humanity. I love that analogy.

And it really makes you wonder: what are we missing? What forms of divine inspiration might be all around us, just waiting to be recognized? It's a humbling thought. Maybe we're limiting our experience of God's revelation because we're stuck in our own ideas of what it should look like. We're so focused on finding God in the familiar that we miss the ways he might be speaking through the unfamiliar, the unexpected, even the unconventional.

You know, it reminds me of that C.S. Lewis quote where he talks about us being like children playing in a slum who can't even imagine the joy of a holiday at the sea. Maybe we're so content with the theological mud pies that we miss the vast ocean of God's revelation that's right there waiting for us. That's a powerful image.

So how do we break free from those limitations? How do we cultivate that spiritual radar, that openness to God's ongoing revelation in whatever form it might take? Well, I think it

starts with humility. You know, recognizing that we don't have all the answers, that our understanding of God and his ways is always evolving. And a willingness to listen, to pay attention to the world around us with fresh eyes and ears, to the voices that might be carrying a message from God, even if they're not coming from the sources we expect.

And of course, discernment. Not everything that claims to be from God actually is. We need to test the spirits, like the Apostle John said, to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Wise as serpents and harmless as doves. I love that imagery. It speaks to that balance we need between open-mindedness and, you know, critical thinking.

It's like being a spiritual detective, searching for clues to God's presence in the world, piecing together fragments of truth and beauty into a larger, more comprehensive picture. And it's an adventure that requires both faith and reason, a willingness to believe and a commitment to seeking understanding. It's not always easy, but the rewards are, well, immense.

It can lead to a deeper, richer, more vibrant experience of God's presence in our lives. And a renewed sense of wonder at the mystery and majesty of creation. Absolutely.

It reminds us that God isn't confined to just the pages of a book. He's actively at work in the world, inviting us to participate in his ongoing story of redemption and renewal. This whole deep dive has been a real eye-opener, you know? It's challenged my assumptions, expanded my understanding, and sparked a whole new set of questions I want to explore.

And I hope it's encouraged our listeners to do the same, to approach Scripture with a fresh perspective, to seek out God's voice in unexpected places, and to embrace the ongoing adventure of faith with a sense of wonder and curiosity. So to wrap things up, let's leave our listener with a final thought to ponder, a challenge to carry forward from this deep dive. Don't just take our word for it.

Go explore, go question, go discover for yourself. Who knows what amazing insights you might uncover? And remember, the journey of faith is never truly over.

It's an ongoing adventure of seeking, questioning, and discovering the boundless love and grace of God. Until next time, keep diving deep and keep seeking the truth, wherever it may lead you.