

## So Then Paul Says...

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL

June 14, 2015

I imagine I'm not the only one in this room who grew up singing songs like "The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that's the book for me" or "because the Bible tells me so." The songs, like all the instruction I received in Sunday School, implied that there was such a thing as *the* Bible, the one and only, singular Bible and everyone who read it read the same thing. Even the fact that we capitalize the word Bible as a title implies a singularity of existence. This, of course, is far from the truth.

There are many, many different Bibles. Even leaving aside issues of translation from the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic texts; even leaving aside the many changes made by scribes over the centuries, knowingly and unwittingly, there is still no such thing as *the* Bible.

The bible is, of course, not a single book, but a collection of books. And each religion has its own collection. The Jewish Tanakh, the body of literature Christians know as the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible, is composed of 24 separate books. But when included in the Protestant canon the 24 books are divided into 39 books and presented in a different order. Roman Catholic bibles include a further 8 books plus additions to the books of Daniel and Esther. The bible used by Orthodox churches divides one of the Roman Catholic additions into two separate books and then Greek and Slavonic Orthodox bibles include an additional 3 books plus 1 psalm, while Gregorian Orthodox bibles include yet another 2 books and Ethiopian Orthodox bibles 7 more beyond that. It goes on.

The New Testament writings have far more consistency in today's bibles still references in ancient theological works tell us that there were more books written than those included in the canon. Twentieth century finds of long lost texts confirm that. If today, with printing press technology to ensure consistency and immediate global communication, we do not have a single canon of Christian scripture, I invite you to consider what things might have been like in the first century of Christianity when no one felt the need to write anything down at all or even in the fifth century when technology consisted of vellum, quill pens, and scribes who were likely to be slaves. Add to that a literacy rate estimated at between 5 and 20% and it's something of a wonder the teachings of Christianity's first centuries survived at all. Many of the early books, of course, did not survive, and some of those that survived got lost for a number of centuries, all of which combines to say that what we call the Bible today is but a small selection of what was written.

So how did what got in, get in? Who decided and why? In the first four centuries there was no agreement on what constituted authoritative writings, just as there was no agreement on authoritative teachings. Most of us probably learned that the canon was set by the council of Nicea in 325. Not true. That council, while formative for Christian

doctrine, did not consider the canon of scripture. There are various references to authoritative lists in the writings of the Church Fathers, those theologians and ecclesiastics who wrote between the first and fifth centuries, but perhaps the largest influence on what we call the Bible today came from a bishop of the Roman Empire named Irenaeus living in what is today Lyon, France.

Irenaeus chose the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John from among all the existing gospels to tell the story of Jesus' ministry. It was not by chance that he chose as authentic and authoritative four books with a common theme of a martyred Jesus, a theme that spoke to the time and place of his community. It was a community under heavy persecution, a community in which many were martyred for their faith. For those Christians, wisdom and comfort around sacrificing their lives for the integrity of faith were important messages. Some of the other gospels which have reemerged in the last century, those not included in Irenaeus's collection, are about themes not of critical importance in that time or place. There are gospels about the risen Jesus or the infant Jesus, the enlightened or liturgical Jesus, Jesus as a married man or as a feminist. There are books critical of the Romans and books that are critical of the Jews, books that support the philosophical idealism of Plato and others that lean more toward stoicism. Perhaps even more than Irenaeus, we have many books from which to choose today.

The book I really want to look at this morning, is directly connected to the Stoics, not so much in its philosophy because it really has precious little of that, but in its association with the great first century Stoic philosopher Seneca. Known as the Correspondence of Paul and Seneca, the book consists of 14 letters, 8 purported to be from Seneca and 6 supposed replies from Paul. Scholars believe the collection dates from the fourth century, but the earliest existing copy is from the ninth century. References to the compiled correspondence can be found in fourth century works by Church Fathers like Jerome and Augustine.

The book is a short one. In fact, the entirety of it is included in your order of service, but it goes something like this:

You're the best.

No, *you're* the best.

No, no, *you're* the best.

Finally, after 6 letters of this Seneca says, "Well, you *are* the best, but do you have to write like an illiterate peasant?"

So then Paul says, "No, *you're* the best!" Return to the beginning and replay it all again.

Three times the correspondence goes through this cycle of mutual admiration and flowery compliment ending with Seneca asking Paul if he thinks he isn't hurting the cause of Christianity by writing so poorly. What on earth is this all about? This correspondence never really took place, so why did someone feel compelled to make it up?

Although the book was taken as authentic by some of the most prominent fourth century Christian writers, including Jerome and Augustine, it has serious historical errors and the style of writing matches neither Paul's nor Seneca's other writings. As Bible scholar J. B.

Lightfoot put it, “The poverty of thought and style, the errors in chronology and history, and the whole conception of the relative positions of the Stoic philosopher and the Christian Apostle, betray clearly the hand of a forger... [The letters] are inane and unworthy throughout.”

So, I have to return to the question of why did someone go to the trouble to write these letters? As with all religious writing there can be multiple interpretations, and certainly with these letters there are. One theory is that they were no more than a student’s lesson in Latin composition. But I lean toward a more intentional and a more political explanation. At the turn of the fourth century, Christians in the Roman world were still under heavy persecution, but by the second decade edicts of toleration made Christianity a legal religion within the Empire. Throughout the rest of the fourth century Christianity grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire, but it was still the new kid in town, the previously illegal and despised new kid in town. It had a PR problem.

Even though a legal religion and eventually the state religion, Christianity in the fourth century was often criticized as being low brow. It was a religion of the common people, one that accepted beggars and sinners and those at the margins of society. The movement’s leader had suffered the lowest form of execution surrounded by thieves and robbers. Further, the writings were not in the style of high literature, therefore they were not considered authoritative. So it seems quite reasonable that the purpose of this quirky little book of correspondence is to confer legitimacy on Christianity by trading on the reputation of Seneca as a prominent Roman citizen respected for his wisdom, his education, his wealth and his connections to the rulers of Roman society. Whatever Saint Paul’s strengths he was not seen as a great writer or powerful orator. Yet, here we have one of the greatest intellectuals of his day conferring on Paul his approval, indeed speaking of him in absolutely glowing terms and urging him to a style equal to the brilliance of his ideas.

In fact, in several places Seneca writes that Paul’s ideas are not only brilliant but divinely inspired. In the first letter he writes, “These thoughts, I take it, were not uttered by you but through you, but surely sometimes both by you and through you.” It’s like he can’t decide who to flatter more, Paul or God. In letter 7, Seneca writes, “It is the holy spirit which is in you and high above you which expresses these exalted and adorable thoughts.” With statements like these Seneca conveys not only regard but offers testimony that Paul’s message is from God.

Additionally, references to students shared by Paul and Seneca imply a cohesiveness of teachings between the two. If that weren’t enough the correspondence goes on to name drop. It makes clear Seneca’s close connection to the emperor and empress, even if historically the wrong emperor and empress. They also make it clear that there is a bond of affection and intellectual respect between Seneca and Paul, lending a reflected glory to Paul. When Seneca mentions that the emperor received Paul’s teachings favorably, it seals the deal.

If further evidence is needed to identify Paul with Seneca, they also share a death as

martyrs. Bible scholar Ruben Dupertuis says that the primary image of fourth century Christianity was the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. Since Seneca was also martyred at the hands of the Romans, this lends a further connection.

I like this odd little book of letters. Although its contents are rather inane, it somehow captures my imagination that someone thought to write it. Obviously, not everyone shares my amusement. M. R. James, the translator of the version inserted in the order of service, was simply annoyed by it. In the introduction to his 1924 book including the letters he wrote, "The composition is of the poorest kind: only its celebrity induces me to translate it once again." But if it was so popular in 1924 that he had to keep writing about it, it must have connected to people in some way.

For me it speaks to dynamic that seems timeless in human interactions, that of granting authority based on endorsement. It is the biblical version of Michael Jordan hawking sneakers. Michael Jordan is a great basketball player so he must know good sneakers when he wears them. Seneca is a great philosopher so he must know great truth when he hears it. In his book *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?*, researcher Timothy Caulfield writes about the timelessness of this idea:

*Some have suggested that humans are evolutionarily wired to follow and perhaps be influenced by people they look up to... Evolutionary psychologists have speculated that this tendency evolved as part of a package of innate predispositions that allow humans to learn from successful role models. The process happens unconsciously.*

And so we continue to look for the approval of others as validating our own choices.

Celebrity endorsements are, of course, not the only way we market or justify whatever it is we want to market or justify. People have made entire careers out of teaching us how to put things in the best light, how to lend credibility and authority, how to win friends and influence people. I know that makes it all sound a bit like selling snake oil, and that exploitative, manipulative side does exist when our goal is to separate someone from their money or induct them into our cult or to get them to overlook our own bad behavior. But there is also a positive persuasion, where we want to offer something we have found to be of use to others for *their* gain rather than for ours.

The most powerful form of persuasion lies in relationship. It is why celebrity endorsements work, because we want to be closer to that light by having what they have or doing what they do. To be like them is to be close to them. And we know that the surest way to change someone's mind about prejudice against a group of people is for them to actually know someone with that identity.

This odd collection of letters between Paul and Seneca is just that, I think. It is marketing religion in that positive way. It is about trying to show those who won't have anything to do with Christianity because of an outside perception that it is not really what they think. I think these letters are an invitation to set aside a perception based on irrelevant externals

and see below the surface. I think these letters are someone's attempt to say, "I have found something life giving in here, and you shouldn't let your prejudices keep you from finding it, too."

It seems a nice sentiment, and yet it remains ineffective because it is a lie. Even if we ascribe the most altruistic motive possible to this forged book of letters, it remains a deception. You can never truly persuade when you do so with a lie. And so we not only need to question what we take as evidence of truth, but what we use to convince others of our own truths. If you wanted to share what you have found to be sustaining and nurturing in your religious life, what would that require of you?

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2015 Jacqueline R. Clement. All rights reserved.