



Faith Pulpit

Pseudonymity and the New Testament

After our freshman year at college, my best friend from high school and I got together and compared our experiences. I was attending FBBC while he attended another well-known Christian college. We both had learned so much and were really pleased with our education so far. Yet as we talked, he told me about something that disturbed him greatly. In his NT survey class his professor believed and taught that many of the epistles in the NT were not written by the claimed authors, but rather that they were pseudonymous. We were both shocked and could not understand why anyone would deny the traditional authorship of any book of the Bible. Unfortunately, this kind of experience is all too common.

The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, I will define pseudonymity and demonstrate why this is an important issue for believers today. Second, I will explain briefly why critics argue for pseudonymity within the NT. Third, I will provide a reasonable defense for why Bible believing Christians can and should trust the authenticity of each NT book.

What is pseudonymity and what is its relevance?

According to D. A. Carson, pseudonymity literally means “falsely named.”¹ It refers either to the practice of attributing a written work to someone other than the author, or to an author’s falsely attributing his work to someone else. Sometimes scholars use the term pseudepigraphy instead. Pseudepigraphy literally means “falsely ascribed” and is virtually synonymous with pseudonymity. Neither of these should be confused with anonymity, the absence of an author’s name, which would apply to some NT books such as Hebrews.

Believe it or not, today the majority of NT scholars argue that many of the epistles in the NT are pseudonymous. The most common books that are said to be pseudonymous are 2 Peter, the Pastoral

Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus), and Ephesians. In fact, the case has been made by various critics at one time or another that all of the NT epistles are pseudonymous. This is the standard position for liberal scholarship. One might expect as much from those who do not have a high view of the Scriptures and do not claim the name of Christ. Yet over the last few decades, the growing trend is that even some evangelical scholars are embracing similar positions. Conrad Gempf explains, “Formerly it was the case that a person’s views on pseudonymity in the canon could be ascertained merely by finding out whether the person was an ‘evangelical’ or not. Indeed, for many, this was precisely the test: if someone believed that the NT contained pseudonymous works they were, by definition, not an evangelical.”² Notable evangelicals (broadly defined) who argue for pseudonymous books within the NT include Ralph Martin, I. Howard Marshall, and Richard Bauckham. Serious students of the Bible know that many popular commentaries are written by scholars who deny the traditional authorship of many NT epistles. In addition, many Christian colleges and universities and virtually all secular universities are filled with professors who accept the pseudonymity of NT epistles as a standard presupposition. It is not hard to understand, then, that this teaching also trickles down to many pastors and churches. Indeed, supporters of pseudonymity are ubiquitous.

Why do critics argue for pseudonymity in the New Testament?

Critics marshal a plethora of arguments and hypotheses to support the idea of pseudonymous epistles within the canon. Usually, the case for pseudonymity of a particular NT epistle focuses on technical arguments concerning vocabulary, style, and certain doctrinal and historical idiosyncrasies. In most cases, the critic compares the suspect epistle to other epistles believed to have been written by the biblical author. After meticulously noting their differences (or sometimes similarities), he or she then proclaims confidently that it is impossible for the same person to have written both epistles. For example, James Dunn argues that Ephesians is pseudonymous for four reasons: (1) stylistic variations from other Pauline epistles, such as long sentences, repetition, and piling of adjectives, (2) an assumed dependency on Colossians, (3) its second generation perspective, and (4) a theological emphasis that appears to represent a later historical situation.³ Another example is J. B. Mayor’s judgment that the same author could not have written both 1 and 2 Peter in full because they use the OT in different ways.⁴

Although a point-by-point refutation is beyond the scope of this article, a couple of general observations should be made. First, these types of arguments generally are very subjective and arbitrary. Often, certain historical or theological presuppositions drive scholars to find or to contrive arguments for pseudonymity. Second, once the door is opened, scholars tend to doubt the authenticity of other NT books. Donald Guthrie notes the principle that “one canonical pseudepigraphon leads to the possibility if not the probability of others, and the investigator can proceed without restraint to postulate as many pseudepigraphic hypotheses as he wishes.”⁵

Beyond these technical arguments lies an even more critical issue. Namely, is it legitimate to include a pseudonymous epistle within the NT canon? A few critics answer this question affirmatively, and assume unashamedly that any pseudonymous epistle in the NT is a literary forgery (i.e., the writer deceptively tricked his original audience). Obviously these critics hold a very low view of Scripture. The majority of critics who argue for canonical pseudonymity, however, contend that these epistles should not be considered forgeries. In other words, they argue that pseudonymous epistles in the canon of Scripture are innocent writings, free of deceptive or false intent.⁶ It is at this point that advocates of canonical pseudonymity compile many theories about why the early church would have accepted pseudonymous epistles into the canon. (1) Some believe it is probable that the NT contains pseudonymous works, since pseudonymity was a common practice in antiquity. (2) It is often erroneously claimed that the ancient world had no concept of copyright or intellectual property, and thus it was perfectly normal for someone to use a popular name to promote his own work. (3) Some propose that pseudonymity was merely a literary device, a kind of transparent fiction, in which the readers were fully aware that the author wrote under an assumed name. (4) Many claim that pseudonymity is not wrong because the writer was in some way preserving the apostle's teaching. What is important to understand is that many of these scholars are trying to justify canonical pseudonymity while attempting to preserve some semblance of biblical authority.

The actual effect of including pseudonymous epistles in the NT canon is, however, quite the opposite. I would strongly contend that the inclusion of pseudonymous works in the canon does in fact damage the Bible's integrity and, therefore, its authority. How could one trust the truthfulness of Scripture if parts of the Bible were fictional, whether or not they were transparent? In addition, pseudonymity greatly affects the interpretation of numerous passages.

Why should Christians reject pseudonymity and accept the authenticity of the New Testament?

I will offer three basic lines of defense against canonical pseudonymity. First, the NT itself argues against pseudonymity. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul warns the Thessalonians not to be misled "by letter as from us" (*di epistoles hos di hemon*). Although it is doubtful that Paul's statement refers to a specific letter, it certainly condemns the practice of writing letters in his name. When this general disclaimer is coupled with Paul's custom of signing his own letters (see 2 Thess 3:17, 1 Cor 16:21, Gal 6:11, Philemon 19, and Col 4:18), it is clear that, in the words of T. L. Wilder, Paul "puts a moratorium on pseudonymity in his name."⁷ In addition, Revelation 22:18, 19 forbids anyone to add to Scripture. By inference, this text condemns the practice of pseudonymous writings since they presumably add inauthentic words to the Bible.

Second, the historical evidence argues against pseudonymity in the NT. One of the key tests for canonicity that the early church used was apostolicity. F. F. Bruce states, "It is doubtful if any book would have found a place in the canon if it had been known to be pseudonymous."⁸ For example,

Eusebius records Serapion's explanation of why he rejected The Gospel of Peter (ca. A.D. 190): "For our part, brethren, we receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the writings which falsely bear their names (ta de onomati auton pseudepigrapha) we reject, as men of experience, knowing that such were not handed down to us."⁹ On another occasion, Tertullian explains that a man was deposed from the ministry for writing the pseudonymous 3 Corinthians, even though he wrote it out of "love for Paul."¹⁰ Invariably the early church rejected works deemed to be inauthentic. D. A. Carson accurately concludes, "So far as the evidence of the fathers goes, when they explicitly evaluated a work for its authenticity, canonicity and pseudonymity proved mutually exclusive."¹¹

Finally, the idea of canonical pseudonymity falls short ethically. Scripture is inspired and therefore inerrant (2 Tim 3:16). If one accepts pseudonymous works into the canon, he must overlook insurmountable blows to Scripture's truth claims. For example, one would have to assume that personal remarks made by Paul or Peter in any given epistle are ultimately just fabrications to complete the illusion. The same epistles, however, sharply denounce lying and deception of any kind (e.g., Eph 4:15, 25; Col 3:9; 1 Tim 4:1,2; 1 Pet 2:1). E. E. Ellis aptly states that such fabrication represents "double-tongued artistry" with "clear and sufficient evidence of deceptive intention," if in fact these epistles were pseudonymous.¹² Ultimately, a writer's motives for attempting to compose a pseudo-apostolic letter are irrelevant. As J. I. Packer notes, "Frauds are still fraudulent even when perpetuated from noble motives."¹³ Thus, one must conclude that the literary category of pseudonymity is simply incompatible with the Word of God.

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