

Timeless Transformations: Religious Literacy

Westar Institute Voting and Decision Making about the New Testament Gospels

Voting developed in the Westar Institute's Jesus Seminar as a way to spur decision making and to ascertain whether a scholarly consensus exists on a given point. In the case of the Jesus Seminar's deliberations on the words of Jesus, for example, it was deemed entirely consonant with the mission of the Seminar to decide whether, after careful review of the evidence, a particular saying or parable did or did not fairly represent the voice of the historical Jesus. The color-coded voting ranges from red (likely authentic) and pink (somewhat likely) to gray (somewhat unlikely) and black (unlikely).

Red - Likely Authentic • Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.

Pink - Somewhat likely • Pink: Jesus probably or might have said something like this.

Gray - Somewhat unlikely • Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to His own.

Black - Unlikely • Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition.

The Seminar concluded that of the various statements in the "five gospels" attributed to Jesus, only about 18% of them were likely uttered by Jesus himself (red or pink). The Gospel of John fared worse than the synoptic gospels, with nearly all its passages attributed to Jesus being judged inauthentic.^[23] The Gospel of Thomas includes just two unique sayings that the seminar attributes to Jesus: the empty jar (97) and the assassin (98). Every other authentic or probably authentic saying has parallels in the synoptics.

Overall, the Jesus Seminar is composed of Protestants, Catholics, and atheists, professors at universities and seminaries, one pastor, three members of the Westar Institute in California which sponsored the project, one filmmaker, and three others whose current occupations are entirely unidentified. Of the 74 there are three women and two Jews. Thirty-six, almost half, have a degree from or currently teach at one of three schools -- Harvard, Claremont, or Vanderbilt -- universities with some of the most liberal departments of New Testament studies anywhere. Only a handful come from outside North America; European scholarship is almost entirely unrepresented. Among the less well-known names are two or three additional evangelical sympathizers, but it is clear they were consistently outvoted by the "far left."