

## **“Bible How’s”**

### **Session 1: How did we get our Bible?**

- These notes follow the work of **Dr. Michael Kruger** in his book **“Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books** (Crossway).”

Before we start:

- This is an extensive and weighty subject. Entire books have been written on how we came by our Bible.
  - For our purposes we are taking a brief overview because of our limitations of time.
- I will be focusing primarily on how we came to recognize the 27 N.T. books as Scripture rather than the 39 O.T. books.
  - The O.T. books were well established as Scripture long before Jesus day by the Jewish people.
- Terminology.

- **Canon of Scripture** (Most general definition):  
*The collection of books which form the original authoritative written rule of faith and practice of the Christian church.*
- **Apocryphal books:** This word means “*hidden.*” This is a reference to books that were left out of the N.T. canon.

### **The importance of this subject.**

#### **1. Most Christians don't know how we got our Bible.**

People don't know because they haven't been taught. This is ironic and sad because the Bible is the most important book ever written. Our souls depend upon what is recorded within it. And yet, most Christians are not very well versed on how it came to be. If we don't know the answers to “*why these books and not these others?*” our faith and confidence in the Bible can be shaken.

#### **2. The credibility of the canon is under attack.**

- **The influence of *Walter Bower*.**

In 1934, Bauer, a German Theologian wrote a book titled '**Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.**' In this book Bauer argued that early Christianity was wildly diverse theologically. He claimed there were many disagreements within the Christian ranks over matters such as - *how many gods are there? Who was Jesus? How does salvation take place?* Bauer's assertion was that there is no such thing as Christianity in a singular sense.

He argues instead that there are 'Christianities' in a plural sense. So, according to Bower, there are lots of versions of Christianity, not just one. Therefore what we have now in our Bibles is just the version of Christianity that was promoted by those who won the fight. Bower would say, if another group prevailed we would have a different canon. What we have then is just the winner's version of Christianity but that doesn't make it the correct

version. Bower's thesis has influenced generations of canon skeptics. More recently...

- **The influence of Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" (2006).**

Among other things, this book, which is fiction, pushed a conspiracy theory about the Council of Nicaea. This was a council of 100 Christian Bishops from all over the world, convened by Emperor Constantine in 325 AD. They met to address many pressing issues facing the church at that time. Over the years people falsely believed that this council decided once and for all, then and there, which books were to be included in the canon and which ones were not. This was not the purpose of this council.

What Dan Brown did, was he seized on this myth, and added a conspiratorial nature to it for the purposes of his fictional book. He communicated that the church leaders were driven by a political agenda and unfairly excluded certain books in their

canon and unfairly included certain books. While all of this is pure fiction, many people's views are impacted by the entertainment complex and it left them with even greater suspicions that the Bible couldn't be trusted. After all the church was had an agenda for putting the Bible together. Furthermore the late date of 325 AD left many to believe that the canon of scripture was open to interpretation for hundreds of years until a bunch of church guys just said "*Here's your Bible.*"

### **3. New books have appeared on the scene causing many to question why they were not included in our Bible.**

In the late 1800's there was a major archaeological discovery made in Egypt when a city called **Oxyrhynchus** was uncovered. Excavations of a city dump revealed that this was where old books and manuscripts were discarded. Among the findings were copies of "*apocryphal*" books such as the gospel of Thomas, Peter, Mary, Judas and the

gospel of Jesus wife. So of course, once these books were discovered people started asking why weren't they included? Maybe our Bible is incomplete.

As we talk more specifically about how we got our books; literally how were they included in the final canon there is something we need to nail down.

**1. The canon is not a list of books the church decided were scripture (many believe this). Rather, the canon refers to the books that God gave to the church as authoritative.**

- So the church recognizes the canon but they don't determine it. The canon is established by God.

The canon becomes clear then as you see books of the N.T. being treated as Scripture by Christians.

- Because God gave the church these books there is a fixed and final nature to them. The canon is not open, so that new books can be introduced. The canon closed with

the giving of the last book (Revelation) in 95 AD.

- Now it did take some time for the church to fully recognize these books, it didn't happen overnight but the church is not the determining factor in establishing the canon, God is.

### **Now let's go back to the church recognizing the canon and using them as Scripture.**

- Some will say the canon wasn't established until 325 AD (4<sup>th</sup> Century).
- Long before the 4<sup>th</sup> century, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, there was already a core of books that were viewed by believers as Scripture.
  - During this time (100-199 AD) some 22 of the 27 N.T. books were already viewed as Scripture by the early church long before any church council met to place their stamp of approval on it.
    - The 4 gospels

- All of Paul's letters - 13
- 1 Peter, 1 John, Hebrews and Revelation
- Most disagreements were around 4 to 5 of the smaller books.
  - So by the second century the early church was already reading from, preaching from and studying these books as Scripture.
  - Now the fact that the church treated these books as Scriptures doesn't make them Scripture. They already were. The church just recognized what God had given them.

### **Why do we have a N.T. canon to begin with?**

- Some would say this was never on the minds of the early church. They would say that later church structure imposed a canon on people.
- There are reasons why we have a N.T. canon.

- **The early church believed that Jesus finished the O.T. story. So the story was viewed as incomplete until Jesus came.**
  - The thinking was that God in the O.T. made promises to transform, redeem and save his people and when the O.T. canon comes to an end those promises are still unfulfilled.
  - So in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews viewed the O.T. as a story without an ending; they were waiting for the Messiah or what is known as the consolation of Israel (Simeon in Lk. 2:25).
  - Christians believed that the story is finished only through the story of Jesus. He is the one who fulfills the promises, transforms and saves his people.
  
- **The N.T. is also included in the canon because of the belief that Jesus initiated a new covenant.**

- New Covenant language is used frequently in the N.T. (Lk. 22:20).
- In the early Jewish world there was a tight link between covenants and written documents.
  - To say you had a covenant was to say you had a book.
    - **Ex. 24:7** – *then he took the covenant of God and read it.*
    - **Deut. 29:21** – *The covenant written in this book.*
    - Christians believe that Jesus started a new covenant and therefore they would have expected a new collection of books laying out the terms of that covenant.
- **Another reason we have a N.T. canon is due to God, through Christ giving special authority to the apostles.**

- They were seen as Christ's representatives.
- Their words therefore were seen as authoritative.
- So if an apostle wrote his words down the early church would view those words as coming from Christ himself. So these writings and letters would be viewed as canon from the start, not just at some later date.

### **When did the N.T. books start being used as Scripture?**

- **The writings of Irenaeus** the Bishop of Lyons in the **2<sup>nd</sup> century (Around 180 + AD)**
  - He wrote about many N.T. books and quotes these books over 1000 times.
    - He saw the 4 gospels as Scripture.
    - All 13 of Paul's letters.
    - Acts, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 & 2 John

- Basically 22 of the 27 books.
- **The Muratorian fragment.**
  - This is the oldest ancient list of the N.T. books accepted at that time as authoritative.
  - Dates back to 180 AD.
    - So within 150 years of Jesus death and resurrection there was already a core list of books accepted Scripture (22 of 27).
- **Theophilus** the Bishop of Antioch
  - Speaks of the 4 gospels and many of Paul's letters as Scripture in a letter he wrote to convince a skeptic.
- **Clement of Alexandria** wrote extensively.
  - Included the 4 gospels as Scripture
  - Paul's 13 letters
  - Again 22 of the 27
- **Justin Martyr in 150 AD.**
  - Wrote about worship – On the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the

country gather together to 1 place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases the preacher verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

- **Ignatius** the Bishop of Antioch in 100 AD.
  - Treated many of Paul's letters as Scripture
- **Polycarp** the Bishop of Smyrna who was disciple by the Apostle John.
  - Has a canon that included the gospels and all of Paul's letters.
- There is internal evidence in the Bible as well dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century (60 AD).
  - 2 Peter 3:15, 16

### **Did the authors of Scripture believe that they were writing authoritative Scripture?**

- This is important because if the authors of Scripture didn't know they were writing Scripture then it sounds as if those writings only

become Scripture at a later point when the church sees it as such.

- Look to Paul's writings to see how he viewed them as authoritative.
  - **Galatians 1:1, 11, 13**
  - **1 Thessalonians 2:13; 4:8**
  - **1 Cor. 14:37**

## **How did the church recognize books as canon?**

### **1. Apostolic origins.**

For a book to be considered canon it had to be written directly by an apostle or by a companion or friend of the apostle.

- Acts written by Luke a companion of Paul
- James written by the brother of Jesus
- Mark written by a disciple of Peter

All canonical books were written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

- This separates these books from the apocryphal books.

- The gospel of Thomas was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century or later as were the other apocryphal books.

## **2. Divine qualities**

For these books to be recognized as canon there had to be indicators or marks of divine quality.

- There had to be a discernable unity and harmony with the other 66 books.
  - Apocryphal books were not in unity. They would contradict.
- There had to be recognizable power and authority to them. These books did not just pass along facts but encouraged, convicted and gave light and wisdom
- They had to highlight the beauty and excellency of Christ.

## **3. Corporate reception.**

- i. Was there a consensus agreement in the church regarding their authority?