

Early Christians and the Biblical Canon

By Don Green

sermonaudio.com

Preached on: Tuesday, May 9, 2017

Truth Community Church

4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

Tonight we're going to kind of do a second part to what I did last week. I hadn't planned to do this but there were multiple requests that I expand on what I spoke about last time. For those of you that weren't with us or those of you that were with us and memory fails you as to what that was, we spoke on the matter of ancient manuscripts and biblical authority and basically traced the way of thinking about how we get from the original autographs that were written at the hands of the inspire biblical writers, how we get from there to understanding and believing and respecting the authority of our English text today. We did all of that, I think there are probably cds of that message available if you would like to take advantage of that. Those are free and we invite you to take as many as you would like to have. So that was what we covered last week.

Now that raises kind of a corollary question, a related issue that we want to address, and we've titled tonight's message "Early Christians and the Biblical Canon." How do we know that we got the right books into the New Testament, is basically the question that we want to address today. I have a lot of material here tonight, a couple of things that I would say about it.

First of all, this is material that I taught at a midweek study back in early 2013 about four years ago. A lot of you weren't even a part of our church at that time and so I feel like it's good for us to review this very foundational material so we're going to do that and if some of you have echoes, "It seems like I've heard this before," that may explain why.

Now, along with that, I want to say this: there's a lot of content in this message and in order to help you as you're taking your notes, if you would like to have a copy of my notes which are extensively footnoted and refer to the sources that I rely on, just let me know. Send me an email, send me a message over Facebook, and I'll be happy to give you a copy of my notes and that will relieve some of your pressure of trying to get everything written down here tonight.

So with that little bit of background, here we go. Fast your seat-belts because we're about to take off down the runway. We do ask you to silence your phones and put them in airplane mode, if you would. Yeah, that has nothing to do with anything.

The early Christians and the biblical canon. You know, sometimes we forget that the early church was filled with people, ordinary Christians like you and me, you know, and

we're so used to dealing with documents of Scripture, the written word of Scripture, and that's what we should do but we forget that Scriptures were written to churches and to local churches and to early Christians that were just like us and so Scripture was written and we receive Scripture through an historical process, that it was handed down to us over the years and tonight's message is going to help us see why that is so significant. The New Testament canon, the word "canon," just one "n," refers to the 27 books as we have it in the English text that we received from apostolic sources. These are the 27 books in English that are genuinely the word of God. It is those 27 and no others. There will never be any others. There never were any others. That's what we refer to when we talk about the New Testament canon.

Now, the word "canon" has the idea of a measuring rod; a yardstick by which we measure doctrine and practice. The New Testament canon tells us what God has truly revealed and everything that we believe and everything that we do in the church and in Christian life is measured by that; it's by that which we can look and see if things measure up or not. You know, you think about the Bereans in Acts 17:11, they received the teaching of the Apostle Paul but they examined the Scriptures daily to see whether the things that he said were so. And so you take what is taught, you take what you believe, and you measure it up against the Scriptures to see whether it lines up or not. If it lines up, you can know that you are believing and doing what God has commanded to be believed and taught. On the other hand, if it doesn't measure up, then you realize that that is something to be rejected, it is something to be repented of, it is something to cast aside, because the canon, the New Testament canon, sets the rule by which everything else is measured and the authority of Scripture is – there are so many things you could say are the central doctrine, I guess – but the authority of Scripture is a crucial central doctrine by which everything else or from which everything else flows.

Now, let's think about the New Testament: the four Gospels, the book of Acts, the epistles of Paul, the general epistles, and the book of Revelation. These New Testament books were written over a period of several decades and they were written in several different locations and they were sent out to other locations and they were written by several different authors, and so there is a complexity even just to the human circumstances surrounding the New Testament. You've got different authors writing to a lot of different people in a lot of different places, and so you start to multiply that out and you realize that there is kind of an exponential accumulation of circumstances that set the stage for the New Testament.

Now, I don't think I really need to spend a lot of time on this because we've taught on it so many times in so many different ways. When we look at the Bible, when we look at those 27 books, we are looking at the word of God. We are reading God's word. We are reading what he intended us to have, given to us through the human authors, and those books, those 27 books, have what we call self-authenticating authority. You can read those books and they testify to themselves, in other words. God's word testifies to God and it has the highest possible authority by its own terms. You can't appeal to a higher authority to establish the authority of God's word, God's word is its own standard and it is its highest witness, and so when we talk about the Bible, the best way to say, "How do we

know what books should be in the New Testament?" these books have intrinsic authority. They are self-authenticating. The early church knew it and they took steps to preserve those writings because they knew that they had something unique and special that needed to be kept.

Now, having said that, we're assuming the authority of God's word, we're assuming the self-authenticating nature of the books in what we're saying here today, but what we want to talk about tonight is the historical process that gave us those books, the historical process in which those books arose. Now, at the risk of oversimplification, and I'm going to go through something very quickly that takes a lot of time to really think through, but at the risk of oversimplification, you can summarize the historical process which gave us the final version of the canon in this way. In the last half of the first century, AD 50 to AD 100, the New Testament books were written and they were copied and they began to be distributed. The apostolic era came to a close at the end of the first century and it's in those last 50 years after Christ had died and resurrected – I always like to join those two together – the Apostle Paul was writing his letters, the Apostle John wrote his books and the book of Revelation, that all took place in the last half of the first century, 50-100 AD.

Now, in the next 50 years, 100-150 AD, and again we're talking very generally and these dates can be sliced and diced a little differently, in the next 50 years, those books became more widely known. They started to be distributed among other churches and they would exchange the letters and copies of letters that they had. Remember, there are a lot of different locations and so the churches were in communication with each other and one church would give the letter from Paul that they had to another, and vice-versa, and so these letters start to spread around like that.

The next 50 years, 150-200 AD, these books began to be translated into other languages. We alluded to this last time. They were translated into Latin, into Syrian language, into Coptic, the Egyptian language. They were translated. Teachers began to write commentaries on them. And so they were written, they were distributed, and then they start to be copied, translated and commentaries being written.

Then over the next 100 years after that, from 200-300 AD – stay with me, I'm about done with the numbers here, and remember that you can ask me for my notes and you can get all of this down later – after that, the individual books began to be collected into a single unit. We're used to having a New Testament which has all 27 of the books in one place, well, that wasn't always the case and here in the third century, they started to collect the books so that they would have them all in one place.

Then in the following century, 300-400 AD, the church fathers, the leaders of the church, finalized the list of the canonical books. They finalized the books and said, "These books are in and the other books are out." And so they formalized the list and said, "We are establishing for all time that these are the authoritative books that are inspired by God which we must believe and teach and practice, and there are no others to be included in them." So Athanasius did that, the Councils of Hippo in AD 393, and Carthage in AD

397, established these lists. By 400 AD, this was established. It was settled in terms of what was recognized to be God's word.

Now, with that little historical overview in mind, here's the question: how do we know that they got it right? How do we know that they got it right? I mean, look, we've all seen stories and it just gets worse and worse as the years go by as they try to introduce lost books of the Bible, I have a book on my shelf, "The Lost Books of the Bible," and you know, what about the Gospel of Thomas or other things like that, and now 2,000 years later, people are trying to inject other things into the Bible. Well, how do we know that we can avoid those, reject those without fear of missing something and how do we know that the early church got it right?

Well, like I said, on one level we can say these books were self-authenticating; it was evident from their own content that these were the books that God had given us. But that's not what we're going to address tonight. Tonight, what we're saying is that God providentially directed the early church to affirm the right books and this is where being a part long term of our church or being a part of any church that is teaching Scripture and theology systematically, this is an example where it really starts to pay off because we've established the doctrine of providence here, the idea that God is providentially at work, God is directing everything that ever happens in order to accomplish his will. Now, how much more so, that's a perfect process, there are no details that go missed by God, how much more so when he is directing his people to recognize and affirm the writings that he's actually given? How much more so would he be directing that to make sure that the right books were kept for all time? It's obvious, the answer to that, and what we're going to see tonight is we're going to look at four unique aspects of life in the early church that would help us understand how God used that process and give us a little bit of a sense of the human element that led to the Scriptures that we hold in our hand today.

What can we look at? Well, you can start turning to Luke 24 for our first one. And we could say it this way, again, we're asking the question about the New Testament canon, how did it work to provide that? And the first thing that we would say is that there was the existence of the Old Testament. The existence of the Old Testament. Christians were used to the idea of a canon because they had already received the Old Testament Scriptures. There was an established canon given through the Jews of the day that had been closed for 400 years, and Christians had an Old Testament canon, what we call an Old Testament canon, which they knew and received and respected as the word of God. They already had the Old Testament.

So if you look at Luke 24:44, Jesus after his resurrection in Luke 24:44 said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled," referring to the three fold division of the law as they received it at that time. And Jesus says, "You know the Old Testament Scriptures, specifically the section by Moses, that which is know as the prophets and that headed up by the Psalms. You know that. That had to be fulfilled. Everything that was written had to be fulfilled." So he is appealing to, he is reminding them, of the Old Testament canon that witnessed to him and

that all of those writings had to be fulfilled. So this is just an indication, a reminder to us, that they already had a principle of canon established in their religious mindset, you could say, in their spiritual mindset, in their convictions. They knew that God had given a revelation with fixed boundaries and within the four corners of that revelation was where God had spoken. That was already established in their mind with the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now, what they did then, having that in place mentally and then as the process starts to come as these apostolic writings are given to them, as the Gospels are distributed, they followed that pre-existing pattern of the Old Testament canon to realize over time that they needed to establish their own canon, the New Testament canon, that revelation which testified to Christ and was the fulfillment of the Old Testament canon that they had already come to know. So what is it that led to the formation of the New Testament canon? Well, they had the prior experience of having the Old Testament, the original canon given through the Jews. That is what they had and, therefore, it's very natural for them to establish a New Testament canon based on the prior pattern that they had received from their spiritual forefathers. So the existence of the Old Testament helped establish the New Testament canon. There you go. That's number 1.

Now, number 2, and we'll get into a bit more Scripture now. Number 2, again, very practical and when you see these things from God's word, you realize how practical and how obvious it all is. Secondly, we could say it was the requirements of public worship. The requirements of public worship helped them formulate and recognize the New Testament canon. This is the second impetus for the development of the New Testament canon and it goes like this: the early church read God's word in public worship. We do too, here at Truth Community, especially on Sunday morning. We make a big point of that. So they had this practice of reading God's word in public worship.

Now, remembering that the process is unfolding and that there are new letters from the apostle coming and circulating and all of that, well, understand that this puts the church, this puts leadership in a position where they need to know what to read. If you're only supposed to read God's word in a public worship service, well, how are you going to know what it is that you read? The very nature that they needed to read God's word meant that they had to distinguish between that which was God's word and that which was not in order for them to be able to do things properly.

This element of the public reading of God's word is found in multiple places in Scripture and I want to take the time to show these things to you. Turn in your Bibles to the book of Colossians, if you would. Ephesians, Philippians and then Colossians. Colossians 4, and tonight verses that perhaps you've wondered why would this even be in the Bible because it seems so mundane, all of a sudden you realize that there was a great purpose in the things that Paul had written in his letters.

Colossians 4:16, just establishing for you the centrality of the reading of Scripture in early church worship. Paul says in Colossians 4:16 toward the end of his letter, he says, "When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans;

and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea." So Paul says, "I want this letter read. I want you to send it so that it's read in Laodicea and when you get their letter, read it as well." Paul wanted his letters read publicly to the early church.

Look at 1 Thessalonians, the next book over, chapter 5, verse 27. Paul says, "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren." Read this publicly so that all the brethren will hear it.

In 1 Timothy, and we're just going naturally through the current order of the canon as we have it. 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul says, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching."

And one more in the book of Revelation, chapter 1, verse 3. The Apostle John said, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near."

Now, beloved, hear: there is nothing really mystical about what we're saying here. There is nothing hidden here. Reading a book in church at that level implied that it was on the same level as the Old Testament which they received as the written word of God and so when the Old Testament was read in the church and then you add these letters or the Gospels from the apostolic sources and you read them, it places them on the same level as what had already been established as being the word of God. So the Apostle Paul could say in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, you don't need to turn there, I'll just read it very quickly, he says this, "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." The word of God, the word of God. "You have the Old Testament canon, you have my letters and you are properly receiving it as revelation from God and I commend you for your response to it," is what he's saying.

Now, why is that so important? How does this relate to distinguishing the true word of God from something else? Well, here's the challenge that they faced: there were also false letters in circulation; there were forgeries; there were people claiming to speak in the name of Paul that were not, that sent out letters as though they were from Paul but they were not. So in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, you can look at that with me. We'll start in verse 1 just to pick up the full sentence. 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul says, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." Paul says, "I realize that there are letters that look like they came from me and that they are disturbing you and upsetting you because they are contradicting what you have received from us in the past."

Now, these forgeries carried weight. They were a threat because they appeared to be written by Paul and, therefore, they had to distinguish what is a forgery and what is the real letter from Paul that we read, that we follow, that we believe, and that we obey. So,

again, this is sometimes kind of hard and we're not used to thinking about our experience with Christianity this way, but put yourself in the sandals of the first century church and they don't have the benefit of a bound Bible with an Old and New Testament in a nice calf-skin leather cover, and all of it printed and established by 2,000 years of attestation and tradition giving it over to us. They don't have the benefit of that. What they have is they are in the fledgling days of the early church before these things are established and the very existence of the church and what they would believe and what they would do and what they would receive was at stake.

So here's the thing that makes this so important, this is why we are confident in the historical process that led to the formation of the New Testament canon: these men who were at the forefront, at the very cutting edge of the delivery of God's word, very committed with the Spirit of God at work in them and having to make decisions that had great consequence, examined things carefully and knew to distinguish what was true and what wasn't. They had information, they had access, they had sources that we don't have today. They were right there on the scene and made these decisions based on information that they had, guided by the Spirit of God in the preservation of his word, and made the decisions because the practical worship of the church from week to week was at stake. I think it's remarkable to think that something so simple, seemingly so mundane, what do you read in a worship service, would become a flash-point for being able to distinguish that which was true from that which was false. Well, to them this was a matter of great consequence. Churches today that don't read Scripture in their public worship center wouldn't identify with why that's so important, but Scripture makes it important.

And there is one other aspect that helped in this as well: the Apostle Paul authenticated his letters with his own signature, and I think this is interesting to see. Let's take a moment to look at this. In order to help distinguish the true letters from the forgeries, Paul had a unique way of signing his letters that helped the early church recognize the true from the false.

Look at 1 Corinthians 16, for example, verse 21. I've got about four passages here and then we'll get into some more historical background in our final two points. 1 Corinthians 16:21, the Apostle Paul says, "The greeting is in my own hand—Paul." In Galatians 6:11, it says, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." In Colossians 4, we'll go back to Colossians 4 here, verse 18, I realize we're going kind of quickly. He says, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you." Here's my signature. This is the authenticating mark. One last one, look at 2 Thessalonians 3. We read this just two days ago during our public worship on Sunday. 2 Thessalonians 3:17, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write." So, Paul's unique signature, it's not a literal seal but it's like a seal that authenticates his letters. He signed them in a way so that the early church could recognize the real thing and that was a protection against forgeries.

Now, why was that so important? It was so important to keep God's word from being polluted and distorted by things that were not really revelation from God. So Paul

providentially and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit set apart his letters with a unique signature to distinguish his true letters from those that were written in his name but were merely forgeries which were not the real thing.

So, how did the early church select the books, recognize the books, is a better way to say it? How did the early church recognize the works that were truly from God? Well, they looked for these distinguishing marks. They looked for the authentic signature of Paul and they were able to distinguish them from forgeries that way and the leaders had to know that. I can't emphasize this enough: they had to know what to read publicly and what to ignore, what to leave out.

So from their position of spiritual responsibility, I mean, think about it. Think about it. Put yourself in the sandals, again, of an early church leader who has responsibility for the welfare of the souls of those that are in front of him and has a responsibility before God to get it right. This is the case for spiritual leaders of all time, but in this case where new revelation is being received, the immensity of the responsibility upon them to get that right so that they would not in the name of God stand before a congregation or sit before a congregation, however they did it back then, and say, "This is the word of God." They had to get that right and so this was a matter of extreme consequence to them, and so they would have paid careful attention to make sure that they were reading the true word of God in the service of worship to God and not letting it be defiled and defamed by forgeries. They took great care on these things.

And so the requirements of public worship led to the formation of the New Testament canon, the prior existence of an Old Testament canon helped them form a New Testament canon. So we think about it this way: their minds were already trained and conditioned to think about a canonical Scripture, a unit of revelation from God. They were already conditioned to think that way and then new revelation from the apostles who were authorized by Christ, who did signs and wonders to attest to their being agents of God in his revelation, and you start to get letters from them, "Oh, we've got to get this down. We've got to get this right." Very practical. Very practical. Their mind was set for it and then as the revelation come, they were in a position to set it apart, give it a status that no other book would be given. Those are the first two points.

Point 3. This is a fun one: the refutation of heretics. The refutation of heretics. Proving heretics wrong, setting them aside, showing them to be false, led to the formation of the New Testament canon. This is the third impetus to clarify the canon. The early church was no different than our church today, our church meaning the true church broadly here in the 21st century, not just Truth Community Church. They had to deal with false teachers. It is the nature of the spiritual battle that we are always going to be battling against those who try to dilute and confuse the people of God and the early church was no different. They had to deal with heretics.

There was an influential heretic in the early second century named Marcion, and in AD 140, Marcion published his own list of the books that he considered to be canonical. He rejected the Old Testament, he rejected the writings of all the apostles except for Paul and

he tried to establish a church based simply on the teaching of Paul and he said that Paul had liberated Christians from the law and thereby severed "the church," so called, from the Old Testament. That was law. Paul did away with the law, he said, and so he published his own list of authoritative books and all that he included was an edited version of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters, leaving out 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. So Marcion here establishes a list that excludes many of the legitimate letters that were written at the time, here early in the formation of the church in the early days.

So there is pressure coming from both directions. From one direction you had forgeries that were trying to be added to the true books. That's what we looked at in the last point, recognizing the true letters and excluding forgeries. Well, what's happening now from Marcion, the threat comes from the other direction. Marcion says, "These books are not from God," and he takes legitimate revelation from God and casts it aside and says, "That's not from God. Don't listen to that. That has no authority." So the threat is from the other direction. Forgeries tried to add to God's word, Marcion was taking away from God's word and both problems, both issues, had to be addressed. False writings, forgeries, threatened to add unworthy books, Marcion tried to eliminate true books. And again, this is very early in the formation, you know, as the early church is just developing and so the early church had to get more precise. They had to get more intentional about defining what is included and what is excluded.

One writer, Donald Guthrie, who's written a standard work on New Testament introduction said this and I quote, he says, "It may well have been in reaction to Marcion's position that the church generally came to view the necessity for a clearer definition of its own authoritative books." Christians needed to know what books could be appealed to as authoritative to test teaching. And you marvel when you think about this, you marvel at the greatness of the wisdom and the power of God that he used a heretic who was trying to undermine the work and revelation of God, he used a heretic in order to help clarify the nature of the true canon. The early church had to respond to that false assault on its writings and in so doing recognizing the threat, they said, "Here's the list. Here are the works that we believe. We include these even though Marcion rejected them." In responding to the early heretics, the Christians helped define what the true scope of the canon was and so the reality of heretics and refuting them played into it.

The final point for tonight and this one's going to take a little bit longer to go through. I've already been speaking 40 minutes. I can't believe it. It seems like 4 to me, which means I've still got another 56 minutes. That's great.

Fourth and finally: the reality of persecution. The reality of persecution and here we enter into and we tread upon a special room of the holiness of God, you might say, a special room where we come with our shoes off and with a special deference to those who went before us in the Christian faith, those who went before us in Christ and who paid a price for that which we hold precious today. The reality of persecution, the fourth impetus that helped define the true nature and the true extent of the canon.

In AD 303, the Roman Emperor was a man named Diocletian. People pronounce his name differently. Diocletian. He issued an order to go throughout the Empire to destroy the Christian Scriptures with fire and with the power of the army, Imperial police carrying out that order, the Imperial police would visit church officials and they ordered them to hand over the sacred books in furtherance of this order from the Emperor. One historian describes it in this manner, "Christianity faced its most extensive and persistent ordeal of persecution between the years 303 and 311 under Diocletian and Galerius. In these years, the number of Christian victims exceeded all previous totals. Diocletian's determined attempt to curb the aggressive faith," meaning the spread of Christianity, "was probably motivated largely by his general policy of imperial unity and restoration of order in the state. In 303, he published edicts ordering confiscation of church property, dismissal of Christians from civil offices, deprivation of their judicial rights, enslavement of all Christians of plebian status," that is, the lower class, "arrest and imprisonment of the chief clergy, and destruction of the churches and their sacred books." He was going to stamp out Christianity in the Roman Empire and he had a position of unparalleled and unchallenged authority to order this to be done. So he sends out his minions, he sends out his police force, in order to carry out his edict.

This historian goes on to say, "The extent of enforcement of the decrees varied, but despite the many martyrs among its leaders and the large number who fell away, the church emerged more thoroughly organized and aggressive than ever." You see, the pressure of persecution forced greater organization. It had a purifying effect. Those who were merely outwardly associated with the church but not truly converted, not truly committed to Christ, they fled from the persecution because who's going to die for that which they don't truly believe? Nothing has changed about that today. So this order goes out and all of a sudden the full power of the Roman Empire is being brought to bear on these lovely Christians, these noble, humble followers of Christ, and the Emperor says, "Hand over your books or you will die. Hand over your sacred writings."

Well, step back from it a moment and think about what that means. You know, most of you have multiple books, you have multiple copies of the Bible and you have other books, you have commentaries or things like that. So if our government issued an order like that, "Hand over your sacred books," well, you would recognize that there is a distinction to be made, right? "I will not hand over my Bible for you to destroy it. My copy of Douglas Moo's commentary on Romans, you can have that because that's a lesser book than this." Well, the early Christians knew that they had to make that same kind of distinction. You see, they had a supreme and a surpassing loyalty to the word of God and they would not hand it over to a pagan Emperor for him to destroy and so they had to make a choice. They had to know what it was that they could hand over in satisfaction of conscience without betraying their loyalty to Christ, and that which they could not hand over, that which they would hide, that which they would spill blood to protect. And this plays out, this played out in the lives of real people in real time and Fox's "Book of Martyrs" has a lengthy summary of the martyrdoms under Diocletian, those people that died for the sake of the faith under his wicked rule, and here's one account of it. It's lengthy but it is compelling and I trust that you will bear with me as I read it to you.

Let me remind you of what we're talking about. How is it that the New Testament canon was established? How was it recognized? We said, first of all, they had the pattern of an Old Testament canon. They had the requirements of public worship. They had to refute heretics in order to be able to decide. And now here we're looking at how the reality of persecution shaped that and here's one account, making a lengthy quote from Fox's "Book of Martyrs."

"Timothy, a deacon of Mauritania, and Maura his wife, had not been united together by the bands of wedlock above three weeks, when they were separated from each other by the persecution." So they had been married for three weeks and the persecution comes and they are separated from one another.

"Timothy, being apprehended, as a Christian, was carried before Arrianus, the governor of Thebais, who, knowing that [Timothy] had the keeping of the Holy Scriptures, commanded him to deliver them up to be burnt." So Timothy has a copy of the Scriptures and the local ruler under this edict from Diocletian says, "Hand them over to be burned."

Timothy answered him and said, "'Had I children, I would sooner deliver them up to be sacrificed, than part with the Word of God.' The governor being much incensed at this reply, ordered his eyes to be put out, with red-hot irons, saying, 'The books shall at least be useless to you, for you shall not see to read them.' [Timothy's] patience under the operation was so great that the governor grew more exasperated; he, therefore, in order, if possible, to overcome [Timothy's] fortitude, ordered him to be hung up by the feet, with a weight tied about his neck, and a gag in his mouth. In this state, Maura his wife, tenderly urged him for her sake to recant; but, when the gag was taken out of his mouth, instead of consenting to his wife's entreaties, [Timothy] greatly blamed her mistaken love, and declared his resolution of dying for the faith." He said, "Woman, what are you doing? What are you talking about? Your priorities are mistaken to urge me to recant."

"The consequence was, that Maura resolved to imitate his courage and fidelity and either to accompany or follow him to glory. The governor, after trying in vain to alter her resolution, ordered her to be tortured, which was executed with great severity. After this, Timothy and Maura were crucified near each other, A.D. 304."

You see, beloved, the church had to distinguish between the canonical books which could not be handed over and the books which could. Life and death decisions were at stake. Torture was at stake based on what you said, what you did. Hand over Douglas Moo's commentary, no problem. Hand over Scripture, they testified by their lives that they'd rather have their eyes burned out of their head and be hung upside down and crucified rather than doing that. That helped establish the limits of the canon. "These books we die for, the others no." And the line, the boundary around the canon was made clear. There was a red line of blood drawn around the canon that we now hold so dear. All of these things helped establish the limits of the canon that we have received.

Well, let's draw some conclusions here in the brief time that we have remaining here. What can we say about this? Well, let's go directly and refute directly what the Catholic Church says. The Catholic Church says the church gave us the canon; that the church determined what books were there and, therefore, that is the basis of it; and the ultimately authority, therefore, is not the books, is not the revelation of God but the church which decided the canon and subsequent Councils centuries later. That's absolutely false. That is not the historical reality whatsoever. The New Testament was not established by church Councils several centuries after the books were written. No, the authority, these books, as we've said, were self-authenticating. They were the word of God at the moment they were written. All we're talking about here is the process by which that was recognized. So they did not become the word of God because a church Council pronounced them to be so centuries later, they were the word of God from the beginning and the church was simply catching up with the revelation of God in recognizing them and defining them. The church Councils only recorded previously established decisions by the men who were in positions of spiritual leadership and access to information and commitment that made sure that they would make the right decisions.

Now, there is something else that you've got to understand about that. Because we are not dependent on the decision of one Council to determine, or a false church like the Roman Catholics, I'm so glad that we're not dependent on the Roman Catholics to determine for us what God's word is, aren't you? As if we had to go through Rome to know what God's word is. Out on the suggestion! Out on the suggestion of something like that! And here's what I want you to see, beloved: this historical process that we have described here tonight all so very imperfectly and inadequately, if you thin about it, you will realize that this historical process is a far better attestation to the canon than what any one church Council could do.

Think about it. You know, I described a process. The books were written starting in about 50 AD in a process that goes for 350 years to 400 AD, over 3 ½ centuries. Now listen to me: what does this tell us? What does this tell us? How does this give us confidence in the historical process that delivered the canon to us today? Beloved, just think. Just think. Many men over many centuries from many locations affirmed the recognition of the canon. There are a multitude of witnesses all pointing in the same direction that affirm the Bible that you hold in your hands. That is a far better process than one point in time by one limited Council. We have the testimony of God's people through centuries and their decisions were recorded as final. That multitude of witnesses is – think about it, think about it just in terms of a court case or something like that. You have one witness and everything depends on that witness. Well, if his credibility is undermined, your case is gone. But when you've got centuries of witnesses and hundreds if not thousands of men paying the price of their life and leading public worship and dealing with heretics, beloved, there's no question to be had.

What you need to understand is that decisions regarding the canonicity of these books were not lightly made and they were not arbitrarily made, as if somebody looked and said, "This is what we want taught," and therefore a preconceived notion of what they wanted to be taught would determine the books that were chosen and therefore only the

books that lined up with what they wanted taught would be it. That's not it. That is not the way the process worked. The conduct of church meetings, the content of the Christian faith, and the lives of Christians were at stake as this process of recognition was being made.

And now 1,700 years later at the end of the process, 1,600 years later, what do we do? What can we say? We look back and we can say this, that God providentially guided his people. Guided his people – watch this – guided them through the actions of wicked people. A wicked heretic destroying God's word. A wicked Roman Emperor wickedly torturing and killing people for the sake of God's word. God using what they intended for evil in order to bring about a good result that we would walk in the wake of. Here we meet in peace and in comfort in a climate controlled room, carrying forth the reward and enjoying the benefit of what these people paid for with their own blood at the hands of wicked people, and it was through this process that God established for all time the boundaries of his revelation, the boundaries of his self-disclosure. You find God in these 27 books of the New Testament and in no others.

Today, we do not add to it. Today, we do not subtract from it. Rather, what we do is this, beloved: we recognize the authority of this book, we treasure it as being that which is given by God himself, and we revere it on that basis, we teach it, we defend it, we respect it, we read it, we study it, we write about it because it's from God and we honor it on that basis. And in addition to that, we are humbled by the fact that better men than us, better women than us, noble, courageous, godly people years ago had their veins burst and their blood spilled in order to keep this word precious, unviolated, pure. Having received it from their forebears, keeping it for their generation, and handing it to the next as they pass off the stage. And we respect this word because of the river of blood that helped deliver it to us. This book is precious and we are faithful to God as we are faithful to the canon.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, when we speak of blood, we realize that the ultimate blood that was shed for the sake of the word of God was the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the blood which alone washes away our sins, the blood which was spilled that an atonement could be made for sinners just like us. We thank you for our worthy Savior and we honor him. We honor the word written and Incarnate as we close here tonight, Father. We thank you for our Savior who is the author and the perfecter of our faith. And Father, we remember that in time, your people, your church, you have seen fit in your wisdom to appoint for them sufferings on behalf of your word, Father, that for a short period of time they endured great physical affliction in order to be faithful to this word and to this Christ which you have revealed to us in your word. And Father, somewhere along the line, you must work in us convictions that are deep and are commensurate with the magnitude and the worth of that which has been given to us and the price which was paid for it to be given to us. Father, 11 of the 12 apostles were martyred for the faith and John was exiled. We serve a Christ who suffered and died on our behalf. We receive his revelation through a river of blood that carried it down through the ages to us. Father, help us to grasp something of

the magnitude of that, that we might be done with the frivolity of this world, that we might be done with lesser things and give ourselves over to your kingdom and to the proclamation and the defense and the love of this word. And Father, whatever that means and wherever it carries us and wherever it takes us, O God, let us recognize the surpassing importance and the surpassing priority and the surpassing affection that your word deserves. Father, and as that word reflects and testifies to you, we bow before you and give you all of our worship and praise with the greatest and depth of thanksgiving for the wonder of having been delivered from this frivolous, wicked, evil world, and to have been brought into your kingdom. O God, we thank you. For those who hear these words and still stand on the outside of the kingdom looking in, O God, we pray for the mighty work of your Holy Spirit to bring the fullness of your saving and sanctifying power to bear upon them until they bend their knee to Christ and enter into your kingdom through Christ alone. We thank you, our God, for the greatness of being your children, the greatness of the favor of the love that you have bestowed upon us, and we ask that somehow you would work in our lives that we might in some measure reflect the glory back to you. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Thanks for listening to Pastor Don Green from Truth Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. You can find church information, Don's complete sermon library and other helpful materials at thetruthpulpit.com. This message is copyrighted by Don Green. All rights reserved.