

Do We Have the Right Books in the Bible - Part 1

The Westminster Confession has summarized the biblical teaching regarding the insufficiency of general revelation to give a saving or redemptive knowledge of God in the first point of chapter 1. The Holy Scriptures are therefore most necessary for the revelation of God's nature and His saving will to His church. And the former ways of God's revealing Himself – through miraculous dreams, foreign language speaking (aka: tongue speaking), direct revelations through God's voice, through living prophets, etc. – have all ceased since the entirety of God's *special* revelation has been committed unto writing. But what exactly is Scripture? How do we know what books are supposed to be in the canon of Scripture – or the index of Scripture. The confession says that God's special revelation for His church was committed wholly unto writing – but how do we know what those writings are?

The question of what books are Scripture became a big issue in the early church when the heretic, Marcion, rejected the Old Testament and much of the New Testament. There was also the issue of gnostic teachers using what were clearly recognized as spurious “gospels” to introduce false doctrines as well. We can see, clearly, however in the history of the church that the New Testament books were viewed as being Scripture and were used and quoted as such by Christians for hundreds of years before any provincial councils such as the Councils of Hippo, Carthage, and Rome in 397, 399, & 401 AD addressed the topic. The great church father, Athanasius, lists all 27 books of our New Testaments in one of his festal letters in the year 367. As far as the early church is concerned, I'd like to assert a few things just for the record. When I was in the corporate world and used to have more conversations at lunch time and after hours with folks about the gospel, etc. it never ceased to amaze me just how much misinformation was out there regarding the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. I have heard from very nice, well-meaning unbelievers that at the Council of Nicea, people *voted* on what books were going to be in the Bible. I have heard that they considered more than 80 gospels, but only the 4 we have made it in, and some by just a very narrow margin. A couple of historical facts need to be made known at this point. First, the Council of Nicea in 325 AD did not even address the question of the canon of Scripture. Second, at no point in the entire history of Christianity has a “vote” been taken regarding the inclusion or exclusion of any book from the canon of Scripture. Third, there were no “close calls” or books that “almost” made it in but just barely missed it. Did any councils ever meet and “decide” what books would be in the canon? No. None of the early church fathers who addressed the issue ever believed they were “deciding” what books would be Scripture and which ones would not. The early regional councils – Hippo, Carthage, and Rome did not vote on anything, nor did they “decide” anything. What they did was this – they compiled lists of the books that had been received by Christians as Scripture and had already been being used, quoted, preached from, and taught as Scripture for *hundreds of years already*.

Key point: If you ever talk to anyone who seriously thinks that there were Christian people *at any point in church history* who were waiting on the deliberations of a church council to “decide” what books were part of the Bible – as if they were all waiting with baited breath and biting their nails thinking: “Boy, I sure do hope Romans and 2 Corinthians make it in... I love those books!” then you can know for sure that this person has never studied the topic and is simply a victim of the liberal propaganda media machine!

We must have the discernment and learning needed in order to recognize what we would call “Internet Lore” when you hear it. This issue of the canon of Scripture is *very important* in our day – because of all of the liberal attacks on Christianity, the Bible, the canon, Christian theology, and etc. that are propagated through state and local universities, movies, books, apostate ministers who teach in the “religion” departments of schools, etc. Just a little bit of studying will help us tremendously.

Case in point: Think about all of the damage that was done by *The DaVinci Code* book written by Dan Brown. That showed just how little the average person in the pew knows about early Christianity and about things like: the formation of the canon of Scripture and the history of the New Testament, etc. The book and the movie were a mishmash of historical fiction and fairytales with some biblical ideas mixed in. It had no historical basis at all and should have been seen as such by everyone. But it wasn't. We are a generation which does not really know *why* we believe what we believe *very well*. And when it comes to the issue of the canon of Scripture, there are some very good books that have come out recently. I just ordered a couple of them for our book table – Dr. Michael Kruger's books: *Canon Revisited* and *The Question of Canon*, Dr. James White's book: *Scripture Alone*, and William Webster and David King's 3 volume series: *Holy Scripture: The Pillar and Ground of our Faith*. One of the reasons these sorts of books are so important today is the rise of men an entire cottage industry which makes its living attacking Christianity. **Please hear me:** These people are successful in these endeavors because of the ignorance of the church regarding the historical issues they attack. We are going to do a couple of messages on this issue of canon – to ground you in the topic *biblically and theologically*. And this is one of the reasons I wanted to do this issue – because I knew it would afford an opportunity to address these issues. And so, what we're going to do in the rest of this message and probably at least 2 more messages is go through Dr. Kruger's 10 basic facts about the NT canon every Christian should memorize, 10 misconceptions about the NT canon, the specifics of what the Confessions says in points 2-3 here, and then the issue of the apocrypha. This is very important information and we must know something about the canon of Scripture and be able to articulate it and answer basic questions about it.

10 Basic Facts about the NT Canon that Every Christian Should Memorize. First, what do we mean by "canon?" When we speak about the "canon" of Scripture, we are simply referring to the list of books which comprise the Bible. We as Protestants accept the 66 books listed in WCF 1.2. And we, contrary to the Roman Catholic religion, reject what is known as the 7 "deuterocanonical" books, aka: the apocrypha. More on this later. First, we need some biblical and historical background regarding the canon of the New Testament. We will discuss the Old Testament canon in more depth when we address the issue of the apocrypha in a future message. You have a handout with these 10 basic facts listed. I'd like to make some historical and biblical comments about each one. Again, these are from Dr. Kruger's work on this topic:

#1: "The New Testament Books are the Earliest Christian Writings We Possess"

Point: There are no other books in existence which bring us closer to Jesus and the apostles than these NT books. If you want to understand *authentic Christianity*, the 27 books of the NT are where you want to turn. It is very important for all of us to understand that the gospels which are in the NT – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are *the only gospel accounts of the life of Jesus which are from the 1st century*. Even though some scholars attempt to put the gnostic gospel of Thomas in the 1st century, everyone knows that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the earliest. The book of 1 Clement might also be a 1st century document – dated to 96AD, but it is still quite a bit later than the rest of the NT books.

Point 2: We aren't saying that books are part of the canon of Scripture because they are the earliest. Dr. Kruger makes this crucial argument: "Our point is not that all first century books are canonical, but that all our canonical books are first century. And that is a point worth making."

Application: What you hold in your hands when you pick up the New Testament is the earliest collection of Christian writings in existence. They are the closest to the events and they have the most accurate text of an ancient document that is known by mankind.

#2: "Apocryphal Writings are All Written in the Second Century or Later"

Point: What are the “apocryphal writings” of the New Testament? The word “apocrypha” simply means: “writings where the authors are not known – books of doubtful authenticity.” There is an Old Testament apocrypha which the Roman Catholic religion put into the canon in April of 1546 at the Council of Trent. And there are apocryphal NT writings which were not received as Scripture by the people of God. They include what are called “Infancy gospels” – works that give information about the childhood of Jesus. An example would be “The Infancy Gospel of James,” “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” and “the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.” These spurious gospels do make some sense because the canonical gospels in our New Testaments tell us only about the birth and the ministry and final week of Jesus’s life. There is a **huge** gap in our knowledge of the life of Jesus. And, of course, that is because *we do not need to know about the middle part of His life*. There are also what are called “Jewish Christian gospels” – “The Gospel of the Ebionites,” “The Gospel of the Hebrews.” There are also acts, letters, and apocalypses. And they are often attributed to famous individuals to try to lend credibility – as you heard: The gospel of Peter, the gospel of Thomas, the acts of John, etc. Peter, Thomas, and John did not write these books – but their names were used to lend credibility.

Here’s the key point: All of these apocryphal writings are dated to the second century of later. And so, let us be very clear now: All of the New Testament writings are from the first century. And all New Testament apocryphal writings are from the second century or later – and many of those apocryphal writings are from the third and fourth century!

Application: Dr. Kruger writes: “The observation of this simple fact quickly calls into question sensationalistic claims about how these ‘lost’ books contain the ‘real’ version of Christianity.” And I would add: When you hear people claim that there were 80 gospels trying to make it into the canon of Scripture, and they just happened to vote Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John into the canon, you can know for certain that this individual does not know what they are talking about. The apocryphal writings contain material that is just downright bazaar. For example, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as a child, Jesus: Breathes life into birds fashioned from clay, curses a boy, who then becomes a corpse, then He curses another boy who falls dead and his parents become blind. Now, the miracles Jesus *actually did* as recorded in Scripture always had a grand purpose – His identity and glory and/or fulfillment of prophecy. The “miracles” in the apocryphal gospels are arbitrary and sometimes malevolent on Jesus’s part. But, for these gnostic heretics, the middle part of Jesus’s life was easy pickings because no one knew anything about it. And if you wrote things that sounded a little like the canonical gospels, you could insert your own theology and false teachings into them (Gnosticism). Then just slap the name of one of the apostles on it and there you have a new gnostic “gospel.” But, the Christian people recognized these gnostic elements – the clear denial of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the flesh – and so, these gnostic works were not only never used by Christians, they were never even remotely considered to be Scripture. Think about it:

1. We know these apocryphal gospels are forgeries – pretending to be written by someone who was clearly not the author. This negates the validity of their content.
2. These apocryphal gospels contain obvious embellishments and legendary additions. For example – in *The Gospel of Peter*, Jesus emerges from the tomb as a giant whose head reaches the clouds, and he is followed by the cross itself which then speaks.
3. Many of these apocryphal gospels are manifestos for Gnosticism – an early heresy which is refuted in the pages of the NT itself, but did not rear its full head until the 2nd century anyway.

Key point: Some early Christians did appeal to apocryphal gospels as *containing* some true material, but what they did quote from those gospels was never out of sync with what is found in the canonical New Testament books.

#3: “The New Testament Books Are Unique Because They Are Apostolic Books”

Point: The canon of the New Testament is intimately connected to the activity of the apostles of Christ. The authority of the apostles is unquestioned clearly from the Lord Jesus's own words to them and about them:

Mark 3:14-15 Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, [15] and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons:

Matthew 10:20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

Matthew 10:14 And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet.

Ephes. 2:20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone,

The apostles of Jesus Christ spoke with Christ's authority – they were His mouthpiece. They did not just preach orally about Jesus. Eventually, they *wrote*. And the books of the New Testament were either written by those apostles themselves, or they were written by close associates of the apostles and under apostolic oversight and authority. Because of Jesus's very clear statements about the apostles and their authority, the Christian people valued the apostles' books and books written by their associates far more than anything written by anyone else.

Historically, it was the books written by these apostles that were "received" and used as Scripture by the earliest Christian communities. These were the books that were kept, copied, and used. When Athanasius wrote his festal letter in 367 with the 27 books of the NT listed in it, he wasn't deciding anything. He had simply compiled a list of what had been received and *what had already been in use by Christians for more than 300 years at that point*.

Illustration: J. B. Lightfoot's translation of *The Apostolic Church Fathers* is a fascinating volume to read. These are the earliest Christian writings we possess after the death of the apostles. It contains 1st and 2nd Clement, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (who died in 108), the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and a few others. What is very clear in reading these precious *uninspired* Christian writings is this: *They freely quote from the New Testament books as "Scripture" – frequently saying, "The Scripture has said..." or "It is written."* What does this prove? It demonstrates clearly that at no point in the history of Christianity did God's people ever believe that they needed the ruling of a church council in order for them to know what Scripture was. Not only did they understand that the New Testament books were inspired Scripture before any church councils ever compiled lists of books, but they quoted them as Scripture and they functioned in the churches for hundreds of years *as Scripture*. Take Polycarp – a man who died in 155 AD. In his letter to the Philippians, he says in chapter 12:1, "Only, as it is said in these Scriptures, 'be angry but do not sin,' and 'do not let the sun set on your anger.'" – quoting from Ephesians 4:26.

Application: It was the church's reverence and respect for the inspired nature of the apostles writings and the writings of those associated with the apostles which gave rise to the proliferation of *forgeries bearing the names of these men*. False teachers tried to use the authority of the names of the apostles to give credence to their forged documents by using their names in the titles: *The gospel of Thomas, Peter, the Acts of John, the Gospel of the Twelve*. Thankfully, because Jesus Christ loves and protects His church, He enabled His people to see the clearly anti-Scriptural teachings of these works. And so, they were all rejected out of hand by the Christian people. Dr. Kruger writes: "The books that the church regarded as apostolic were the books that were read, copied, and used most often in early Christian worship. These are the books that eventually became the New Testament canon. The canon is the byproduct of the ministry of the apostles."

Dr. Kruger concludes with these brilliant comments: "Of course, some modern scholars dispute the apostolic authorship of some of the New Testament books, claiming they were written by later authors only pretending to be the apostles. However, these claims are by no means proven, and my other scholars dispute them. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the early church was in a better

position to ascertain the authorship and origins of these books than are modern scholars two thousand years later.”

#4: “Some NT Writers Quote Other NT Writers as Scripture”

Point: One of the key issues is: *When were the books of the New Testament first used as inspired Scripture*. Critics argue that the books were not written to be Scripture and were not used as Scripture until the end of the 2nd century. However, what ought to lay such ideas to rest is this simple fact: The NT writers quote other NT books as Scripture!

2 Peter 3:2 that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, *and* of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior,

2 Peter 3:15-16 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation--as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, [16] as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

1 Tim. 5:18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages." [quotation of Luke 10:7]

Luke 10:7 And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house.

Dr. Kruger says: “If the NT writers were citing other NT writers as Scripture, then that suggests the canon was not a later ecclesiastical development, but something early and innate to the early Christian faith.”

We will press on with these important facts about the canon of the New Testament next Sunday night we are together, but I want to highlight to you one very important facet of WCF 1.2. The last phrase of that point after the books of the Bible are listed says: “All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.”

Please remember: Books are canonical *because they are inspired, not because any group or body of men or church council says so*. God’s Word has *self-authenticating* authority. That’s what WCF 1.4 is about and we will cover that later on. But I cannot emphasize the importance of this point enough. When God speaks to His people, He does so in writing with *inherent* authority – it is a self-authorizing authority. Just like I speak to my children with self-authorizing authority. When I tell them: “It is now bed-time,” I do not accept them asking, “How do I know you really said that, dad?” It’s me talking to them and they know it is me. It is the same with God’s people hearing His voice:

John 10:27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.

The character of the canonical books draws the people of God as a whole to them. And as soon as those New Testament books were written, they were received, used, revered, quoted, and preached as the very Word of God. Why? Because the sheep of Christ hear the voice of Christ in His Word. God had a purpose for which He inspired those books. It is not possible that God could have a purpose for His church which He would fail to fulfill. And that is why we can have absolute certainty that the people of God have the books God wanted us to have.