

STUDY ON THE BIBLE

Session 3 - The New Testament (Part 1)

Last week we explored how the Old Testament came into being and how it was written by over 27 authors (all under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit) and took around 1,000 years to complete. We saw that the Old Testament canon was probably solidified by around 200 B.C. Yet, this didn't keep man from arguing over other possible inclusions or deletions for the next 1,000 years. What's interesting to note is that despite all the theological arguments that ensued from the time of Christ forward, the canon remained in tact. Only the Catholic church included the Apocrypha later (centuries later) but most of Christianity remained faithful to the books the Hebrews believed to be divinely inspired - the same 39 books we have today in our Old Testament.

This week we are pressing forward in history to the New Testament. If you recall from last week, there were numerous conversions of souls to Christianity purely from Christians explaining Jesus in the Old Testament to the lost. They saw the Lord Jesus Christ on every page of the Old Testament. So with this thought in mind, a question arises which is, "*Why did the early Christians feel a need to create a new set of canonical books?*" As we will see again, it wasn't man who sought to bring about a new set of canonical books, it was God. The early church was doing very well with just the Old Testament in hand. The Spirit was leading them to see how Jesus truly was the fulfillment of all that had been written in the Law. Yet, God, through Christ, had set a new covenant in place and the early church, for the sake of unity in the future, needed to understand this new covenant. In addition to this, there was the idea that these truths needed to be written down, as opposed to being purely transmitted orally. In time and due to some challenges to the faith, even the church saw that a canon based upon the new covenant would be necessary.

[John 14:25-6]

Q: What is the promise Jesus made to His disciples in this passage? (*v.26 - The Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to give them remembrance of all that Jesus told them.*)

This passage became the cornerstone of how the New Testament eventually became canon for the church. The early church fathers had to take this passage and a few others to come to a method for testing for divine inspiration. To understand the process, you need to understand the importance of the original apostles of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. He was the long-awaited Messiah and Savior of mankind promised by God in the Old Testament. Now He walked the earth and had a three year ministry ordained by the Heavenly Father. Towards the very beginning of His ministry, He chose 12 men to become His disciples. These 12 men spent the majority of those three years Jesus ministered with Jesus. They heard His teachings and they were privy to His answers when they didn't understand one of His teachings. They also saw Jesus' miracles and were even commissioned to go out in His power and in His name and do similar miracles to prove that God was working through them, too. Since Jesus was God, all of His words were automatically considered authoritative and divine in an *de facto* manner.

Then Jesus ascended into the heavens in front of the apostles (see Acts 1) and these men

were charged with taking the message of the kingdom of God to the rest of the world once the Holy Spirit fell upon them. This happened in Jerusalem 40 days later on the day of Pentecost. Now, here's the important piece of the puzzle for our study, once the Holy Spirit filled these apostles (11 men, as Judas hung himself), the early church saw the teachings of the apostles as authoritative as well. They were the sole repository of the truths that Jesus taught and they were eye witnesses of His life and miracles. They became the Lord's authoritative spokesmen after His ascension. These men were inspired and gifted by the Holy Spirit to teach and write inerrant doctrine based upon their experiences with Jesus. Thus, the single most important criteria for any book to be used by the ancient church was for that book to be written by an apostle or at least under the supervision of an apostle with the stamp of approval from that apostle. Only these men had the credentials necessary from the Lord to write books worthy to be used by the church for teaching and establishing doctrine.

So the question is who are the apostles? There ended up being 13 of them, though 12 are of primary concern. Here's the list of the original apostles (minus Judas Iscariot): Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and his brother John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot, Judas son of James. Now just before the Holy Spirit fell upon the early believers at Pentecost, they chose by lots a replacement for Judas Iscariot. The replacement had to be a man who had been with them since the beginning of Jesus' ministry and be a witness of the resurrection. The replacement chosen was a man named Matthias, who is never mentioned again in Scripture. (Acts 1:21-26) However, Jesus Himself chose another man as an apostle - a man named Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a persecutor of the church and was present at the stoning of the deacon Stephen (Acts 7:58). While on a mission to further persecute the church members, Saul was confronted by Jesus Himself and was converted to the Christian faith (Acts 9). Like the original 12 apostles, Saul, who changed his name to Paul, was directly chosen by the Lord Jesus to be one of His apostles. So, if any book came into a church and was going to be used in worship, teaching or building doctrine, it had to be written by one of these men or under their supervision with their blessing.

Just as a note on the New Testament, the originals were written in Greek. This was the same Greek as the Septuagint, which was the Hebrew Old Testament translated into Greek.

1. Thus, the first and most important criteria for a book to be considered divinely inspired in the New Covenant was that it was of apostolic origin or written under an original apostle's supervision. Was a book ancient?

Let's take a look at the four gospels:

- 1) Matthew was one of the original 12 apostles
- 2) John was one of the original 12 apostles
- 3) Mark was the disciple of Peter and wrote his gospel while with Peter in Rome
- 4) Luke was Paul's traveling companion, advisor, and physician. He wrote Luke and Acts at the request of a benefactor to the faith named Theophilus, under the supervision of Paul.

One of the interesting points of the four gospels that did end up in the canon is that each is anonymous. There is no name associated with any of them as to who the author is. The early church knew them and accepted them but there is nothing in the book itself that lists the author.

Matthew and John were established tradition early in the history of the church. As early as Papias in 95 A.D. (who was a disciple of John) he recognized that Mark set down to writing Peter's account of the sayings and doings of the Lord. Peter's authority was never in doubt. Luke was known to be Paul's companion on his missionary journeys and personal physician. However, all the heretical gospels have an apostle's name attached to it. (Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter)

As it turned out, apostolic authorship while the main criteria also had some give to it. It wasn't insisted that it be an actual apostle but like with Mark and Luke, if some form of apostolic authority could be established a book could be seen as divinely inspired. The book of James is one of these books that was accepted as apostolic in this round-about manner.

[Galatians 1:19]

Q: Who is James? (*The brother of the Lord. One of Joseph and Mary's children who grew up in the house with Jesus as his older brother.*)

Now based upon this James (not the brother of the apostle John who were sons of Zebedee), was the author of the book of James. So being part of the holy family carried with it a near apostolic status in and of itself though it is obvious by the Galatians reference that this James was a leading figure in the early church with his close connection to the actual apostles. (Which is amazing since during Jesus' ministry, his siblings tended to not believe in Him.)

[John 7:5] - Jesus' biological brothers didn't believe in Him early on in His ministry

The book of Jude made it into the canon on the same basis. Jude was the brother of James, discussed above. So he too was a member of the holy family and grew up with Jesus as his older brother and at some point came to faith in Christ and became acquainted with the original apostles. Thus his book was seen as divinely inspired.

[Matthew 13:55] - a list of names of Jesus' biological brothers including James and Jude.

2. The second criteria was that the book was recognized by the early churches as divinely inspired. Was a book catholic (universal) in use?

The question for us as those looking back to see the process at work was, "*How did the earliest leading churches regard a particular book?*" Each individual book that was ultimately acknowledged as canonical started off with local acceptance and went up the chain from there.

The leading churches of the first century were Ephesus, Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome and Carthage. There were, of course, many other churches, but these were the ones that were seen as the leading churches of their age. If a book was used by these churches and deemed divinely inspired, then it was going to be much more likely that it would be used by the other churches. The canon of the New Testament didn't really come to be codified into what we have today for a few centuries. There were some books that appeared early on in the life of the church that were considered divinely inspired as everyone understood they were from an original apostle. This was possible due to these church leaders knowing the original apostles personally. Many of the

earliest church leaders were disciples of the original apostles and knew them well. Thus, there was no problem verifying these books authenticity as having been written by one of the original apostles.

3. The third criteria for determining divine inspiration was whether or not the book contained apostolic content. Was a book orthodox? Did a particular book's contents agree with the doctrine handed down from the Lord and His apostles? If there was anything contrary to the apostle's teaching, the book was considered to be non-inspired. This is very similar to one of the ways the Old Testament books were originally determined to be canonical or not was the thought that since God is not a God of confusion or contradictions, anything that is genuinely His Word will be consistent with His other teachings.

Remember that the early church leaders, those who had personally heard from the apostles or one of their direct disciples, recognized in time that these distinctions would be increasingly difficult to determine. It would be next to impossible to keep track of all the church's teaching based on the oral tradition.

The deal is that while to the early church the first criteria listed was the most important for the church in next century or two that this third criteria became essential for determining what was going to be part of the canon. In fact, this third criteria became the major reason the church eventually saw a need to develop something like the Old Testament due to challenges that were being faced by the church. In short, the first and third criteria were often set apart as the two main criteria by the church in the second - fourth centuries were antiquity and orthodoxy (was the book old enough and from the last half of the first century AND did were its teachings consistent with the rest of what was known to be divinely inspired?) Just keep in mind when it comes to orthodoxy - the third criteria - that what we in the modern world see as differences of teaching within the New Testament books were not the issues that the early Christian leaders of the first through third centuries faced. Docetism (the belief that Jesus did not have a real physical body but only appeared to have one) and Gnosticism (the belief that all matter is evil and only the spirit is good which led to many various heresies within the early church) were major doctrinal errors that the early church combated.

One such example concerned a book judged by the early church to be non-inspired which was the Gospel of Peter. When the bishop of Serapion discovered that the church at Rhossus was reading the Gospel of Peter in their church services, he became livid and made a personal visit to the church to make sure they eliminated that book from their worship and teaching and undo the damage that the book had caused. (The Gospel of Peter was docetic in that it stated that since Jesus didn't have real body, He didn't really suffer or die during His crucifixion.)

In addition to these three criteria, which were the major criteria used by the church in determining which books were divinely inspired, they weren't the only criteria. Several other comments need to be inserted here before looking the historical process God used to bring the New Testament together.

[I Corinthians 12:3]

Q: What is the test Paul mentions here to the church at Corinth concerning the Holy Spirit? (*that*

no one can proclaim Jesus as Lord without it being from the Holy Spirit)

[I John 4:1-6]

Q: Why were Christians told to test the spirits? (*v.1 - not every spirit comes from God*)

Q: What was the test to determine if a spirit was from God or not? (*v.2 - if it confessed Jesus Christ had come in the flesh*)

Q: What spirit claims that Jesus Christ did not come from God? (*v.3 - the antichrist*)

Q: What do those who know God do? (*v.6 - they listen to us*)

Q: Who is the “us” in v.6? (*It is the apostles and their disciples*)

The early church went by the motto (when it came to whether a book was inspired or not): TEST EVERYTHING.

For one example, the Gospel of Thomas, by its title sounds like it came from one of the original apostles. So it would meet the first criteria. However, its teaching did not even come close to being in line with the teaching of the rest of the books considered to be inspired. It was a gnostic book written a century later than the rest of the true New Testament books. In addition to this, none of the churches ever saw it back when the apostles were still alive thus making it a book that was never circulated or considered inspired by the ancient church.

Another note concerns the authors of the books that were later seen as worthy and proper to be placed into the New Testament canon is that not every book written by an apostle ended up in the canon. This was especially true of Paul.

[Colossians 4:16] - This tells us that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans which was to be read at the church at Colossae while the letter the Colossians had was to be read in Laodicea. The letter to the church at Laodicea was lost and we have no record of that letter. A copy of it has never been found. (However, based on the Lord Jesus’ words to that church in Revelation 3:14-22, it may have been intentionally lost, but this is pure speculation. We just know there are no surviving copies of this book that have been located to date.)

What we call I and II Corinthians is actually II and IV Corinthians.

[I Corinthians 5:9] - This mentions a previous letter to the Corinthians that Paul wrote that didn’t survive. This would have been the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.

[II Corinthians 7:8] - This mentions a letter called the “severe letter” which was written between what we call I & II Corinthians. This letter was also lost (accidentally or purposefully) and we have no idea what the exact contents of the letter were - though based on the context of chapter 7 we have some ideas. This was the third letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.

As for Peter, there was a book ascribed to him called “The Apocalypse of Peter”. It was a popular book in the ancient church as it painted horrific pictures of what the lost would endure in hell. (In fact, Dante, got his material for his book “The Inferno” from this book.) In time, this book and another ascribed to Peter called “The Acts of Peter” (which gave an account of Peter’s Roman ministry and execution) became sufficiently evident that they were not truly the work of the apostle Peter that the church quit using them.

While I Peter faced no difficulty in being accepted as inspired and authored by Peter, there was considerable hesitation concerning II Peter. It took the church about three centuries to be accepted as legitimately inspired.

Paul also became aware that there were letters circulating very early on the life of the church that were supposedly written by him yet he denies writing. To this, he gave a simple test to those churches receiving his letters to test for authenticity.

[II Thessalonians 3:17]

[Galatians 6:11]

The original letters from Paul had his special handwriting. He would write large or in a special way to designate his real letters as coming from him. However, since none of the original have been preserved, only the original recipient of the letter could know if it was from Paul or not based on the handwriting.

One of the works of Paul called “The Acts of Paul” was one of the earliest exercises in Christian novel-writing. It wasn’t written until the middle of the second century. While it certainly was orthodox in its teaching and edifying (especially if one believed that celibacy was a superior state of being than matrimony) it was well known not be written by Paul or have his stamp of approval on it (since it was written 100 years after his death). Like all pseudonymous books, they were seen as pure fiction and not inspired.

So here you have the major criteria of how the New Testament books were determined to be divinely inspired. Next week we will look at the actual process of history which the Spirit used to cause the New Testament to come into being.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?